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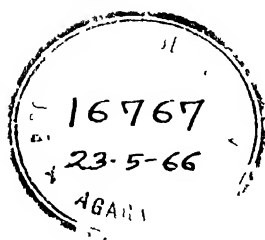
The Ring

The Ring



by Karah Feder-Tal

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I  *The Beach of the
Black Rock*

Very early in the morning Jair was awakened by his father. "Jair, psst, Jair." He shook his son gently. Jair was suddenly wide awake. He jumped out of bed at once, looking in surprise at his father.

"What is it?" he asked.

Because Miriam – Jair's sister – was still fast asleep, Father put a finger to his lips and motioned Jair to dress quickly. While Jair hurried into his trousers and shirt Father looked out of the window.

The small, unpaved street lay silent and indifferent in the dull morning light. Nothing moved in the houses. There was not a sound to be heard except for the regular

snoring which came from the open window opposite. Behind the houses the hills stuck their ashen tops into the sky, and beyond them was the sea, waiting for the sun.

Father turned around and beckoned Jair to follow him. Softly they crept out of the house. Outside on the porch a rucksack lay ready. Father picked it up carefully and together they walked almost soundlessly through the lifeless street.

It was neither warm nor cold, and yet Jair shivered. He was still very sleepy. They came to Jichje's house and Jair stepped aside to the tap by the gate. I'll just wash my face, he thought. He bent down quickly, but a hiss from his father stopped him. They walked on in silence until they came to the beach. Jair looked longingly at the sea. His father noticed it.

"Come on, just a little bit farther," he said.

The beach on which they stood was surrounded by a curved chain of bare hills. Between the sea and the rock which formed the end of the chain ran a narrow strip of sand, leading to a second curved beach. Father walked on firmly and did not slow down until they had reached the second beach. Not far from the narrow strip of sand there was a black rock, standing apart from the other rocks. It looked as if it had separated itself from the chain of hills round the beach and had moved a step forward. Here Father stood still.

"The beach of the black rock," he said. "This is where we were making for. Now we can rest and talk. But you go and freshen up a bit first."

Jair ran towards the sea. Seen more closely it was greyish green. He kicked his sandals off and hurried into the water, which was surprisingly warm and felt soft. Then he dipped his head deep under the water and

splashed around with his hands. There . . . Jair began to feel better. With his fingers he combed his straight, fair hair back from his face and used the bottom of his shirt as a towel. With his shirt hanging loose over his trousers, he returned to his father. Why should he have been dragged here so early?

In the meantime Father had conjured up some breakfast from the rucksack: thickly spread sandwiches, olives in a jar and even a bottle of milk, still cold from the refrigerator.

"I suppose you're wide awake now," said Father. "I don't think you've ever been up so early. It's a good thing there's no school for another week or so, so you can catch up on sleep later. But today, and maybe tomorrow, you've got to help me. Could you keep watch on this beach for a few days?"

"Keep watch?" Jair looked with surprise at his father, who gestured towards the beach and the sea with a broad sweep of his hand. "Swimming, eating and sleeping," he went on, "and fishing. There's plenty of opportunity for that here. An ideal holiday spot for people who want to enjoy peace and quiet. We – Mother and I – want to put up a hut here. Do you remember the hut we used to live in? It could easily be turned into a bungalow, with a nice overhanging roof and a wide porch. The biggest room would be for the four of us, the other three would be for guests. They could have a wonderful holiday here. And Mother would cook lovely meals for them. It would be a kind of little hotel, you see? That would bring in a nice sum of money, and you know we could do with it. Maybe we could at last do something about an automatic harpoon for you. Well, what do you think of it? Do you want to help?"

Jair nodded fiercely. Of course he wanted to help, and not just because of the coveted harpoon, either.

When Father and Mother first came to Israel, Jair was only a baby. He had been born in Europe at the end of the Second World War and after many wanderings he had come to Israel with his parents. But even here they had found war, so that Father had had to join the army at once. Mother took Jair to live with Father's sister, who had come to Israel a year earlier. It was only when that war was over, that Father had come to fetch them, to start a new life together.

They had found a house of their own – a wooden hut, right in the south of the country, almost on the farthest tip, near the Red Sea. A new town was being built there, Tamaria. It was a big job, building a new town. Roads had to be constructed, and houses. It was just the thing for Father, who could do all kinds of things. Mother thought it was much too hot in the south. But Father had consoled her; "We'll live very near the sea. When you're too warm you just walk into the water. And think . . . how healthy for the children!"

So they had moved south. That was quite a few years ago. Jair was twelve now. It looked as if the lean years of his earliest childhood had for ever put their mark on him. He had been small and thin and that's how he stayed, however much he ate. But Mother had resigned herself to it, for he was never ill. He is as strong as a horse, said the doctor. A tough little camel is Jair, said their friends. Years of hard work lay behind Father and Mother. Jair had been part of it all. He remembered that first house, the yellow hut, very well. His sister Miriam had been born

there. Now they had a nice concrete house, just like the other oldest inhabitants of Tamarua.

The old huts stood now in the middle of the town, which had been built around them in the course of time. Now they would have to go. A beautiful park with date palms and seats would take their place, said Father. How wonderful it would be to sit there in the shade in a few years' time!

The huts were being sold by the Town Council. An advertisement in the paper had given Father the idea of buying one of those huts to make it into an hotel on the beach.

While Jair was still thinking about his harpoon, Father took a shovel and a little pole from the rucksack. A small nameplate was nailed to the pole.

"JOSEEF HARAR" read Jair. Father's name!

"You see, my boy, everything has been taken care of," said Father cheerfully. With the shovel and the pole under his arm he walked into the middle of the circular beach. He rubbed his hands and began to dig in the sand. In no time he had made a fairly deep hole, and in it he and Jair planted the pole as if it were a tree.

"There, that's done," said Father, satisfied. "Now your job begins. You could put it this way: I have taken possession of the soil by putting my name on it. Annexation you call it. I really ought to have permission first, to put that bungalow here, but I don't know whether I can manage to get it so quickly. It might take a day or two, and that's why I've brought you here. You'll have to keep watch during that time. Should anyone get the same idea and come here, he'll see not only the notice with my name, but you as well. And then he'll understand that, as far as

he's concerned, he'll be wasting his time. At least, we'll hope so. As soon as possible we'll peg out the place and put up a flag. Then we shan't have to worry about anything, see?"

"Sure! It's a super plan." Jair's grey eyes looked admiringly at his father. But then he asked, surprised, "How will you find the time to run a hotel? You're busy all day, aren't you?"

"Oh," said Father airily, "in the mornings and evenings. But most of the work will come on to Mother, I suppose. And of course I count on your help too. Between the four of us we'll manage very well. And now I must be off. I've got a long, busy day ahead of me. You'd better go to sleep for a bit; there's nothing to watch yet. Later on when there are more people about, that's when your job starts. You must stay here until it gets dark. Mother will send you everything you need. Good-bye, my boy." Father picked up the rucksack and the shovel and was about to go. Then he turned round and said to Jair, "Yes, one more thing. Not a word about this to your friends when you go home tonight. Nobody must know anything about it yet. All right?"

"Okay, Father," said Jair. "Don't worry. I shan't say a word, and nothing on earth will drag me away from here." He leaned on the important pole and watched his father hurry away. Now he understood why Father wouldn't let him wash at the tap in front of Jichje's house. Jichje, or someone else, might have awakened and have seen them go past so early in the morning. What answer could they have given to inquisitive questions? Suppose for instance, that Jichje had heard of the plan – Jichje the Yemenite, Father's shadow, as Jair and Miriam called him. Jichje and his family had lived in Tanlaria almost as long as they

had, and wherever Father had worked, Jichje had always followed him closely – even to the Town Council. Some time ago the Council had appointed Father as Building Inspector. Jichje had badgered and bothered the Council until he had been given an appointment too. A few months ago he had been made nightwatchman. So if Jichje now so much as heard of Father's plan, he would be sure to say, "What a splendid idea! What a clever fellow Joseef is! Always thinking up something new. An old Yemenite like me can always learn something from a chap like that!" And then he would go to the Town Council with a great hullabaloo in order to secure a piece of beach as well. Who knows, maybe he would then spoil Father's chances, and after all, it was Father who had first thought of the idea. No, nothing must leak out!

Whereas a boy in the wilderness of the cold north will make a fire before he does anything else, a boy in the hot south will make for the shade as fast as he can. And if he doesn't find any shade, well, then he'll make it himself.

So Jair looked across the beach where in a few hours' time the sun would beat down fiercely. Apart from the thin pole there was nothing that might give shade. But there, at the foot of the naked, bare rocks, lay a heap of small stones which had been torn loose in the course of time by storms and rain and had rolled down. He could make use of those stones.

Jair dragged and rolled about a dozen large stones nearer to his pole and piled them on top of one another. He stopped the gaps – as far as possible – with smaller stones and in this way he made a neat little wall. It had the shape of an L. Jair looked at his work and was

satisfied with it. Now the sun could shine as much and move as fast as it pleased. He would always have shade on one side.

What was he going to do now? Just sitting and waiting was terribly boring and he couldn't sleep any more either. In a while Miriam would come with the basket of provisions – but that would probably not be for several hours. He hoped Mother would remember to put in his library book and his harpoon. Then he would have something to do.

But what should he do now? Wait a moment, he could look for shells on the beach. Maybe Raffi – his best friend – and the other boys from his street were already on their way to the large beach. They would wonder why he – Jair – hadn't gone with them today. Diving for shells was their chief sport in their spare time. The sea always provided new surprises and besides, it was a way of earning some money.

Most of what they found in the sea or along the beach they took to Hassan the Turk. He did a trade in sea treasures at the entrance to the big hotel. Hassan had a wooden leg. At the time when the hotel was being built, Hassan had had a bad fall from a high scaffold and had lost the use of his left leg.

Hassan would buy the finest star-fish from the children. Sometimes they found sea-horses and white coral. They also brought him petrified snails and shells to make necklaces. He would give them a piastre for a boxful of shells; for larger objects they would get three piastres apiece. And if it was something very special, they might even get five piastres. The boys thought it was exploitation. They knew quite well that Hassan sold the corals and the shells for far more to the hotel guests. But Hassan claimed that

someone with a wooden leg couldn't pay more, and that was the end of it.

Jair was usually lucky. Quite often he found five-piastre treasures. Last year he had found so many that he had been able to buy a pair of goggles. Real ones, such as divers have, with a long, curved breathing funnel and a valve to keep out the water. At first it had been difficult to balance the funnel above the water so that it didn't collapse sideways, letting the water in. By now, though, Jair was so experienced that he hardly noticed when he was wearing his goggles. He could stay under water for hours with them. He hoped that Miriam would bring them. He had never dived for shells at this beach. Who knows – five-piastre treasures might be lying in heaps at the bottom of the sea.

Jair sauntered towards the sea and sat down by the edge of the water. A wide strip consisting of thousands of pebbles lay along the shoreline under water. It looked as if they rose and fell with the waves. They glittered and shone like the stones in a beautiful mosaic that Jair had once seen in a synagogue. All the hues of the rainbow were here, and even more. Pink-and-white marble pebbles and black-and-yellow flecked ones lay between bronze-green and terracotta ones. But when you took the stones out of the water, they became dull and uninteresting.

After watching intently for a time he lay down on his back with his feet in the water. With outstretched toes he fished and scratched around in the water until he managed to get hold of a pebble, threw it up high and caught it in his hands. This was a game. When you had the pebble in your hand, the point was to guess its shade with your eyes shut. If you guessed right, you put the pebble by your side. But if you were wrong you had to fling it back into

the sea. The one with the largest heap of pebbles by his side was the winner. Jair often played this game with Miriam. Both were adept at throwing up pebbles. But Jair always won. He said his toes could feel what shade they were.

This time the heap mounted quickly, as usual. A pity Miriam isn't here to play as well, he thought. His toes burrowed among the hard stones and the soggy sand. Drops of water spluttered around him and the pebbles clattered down beside him. But suddenly he stopped his game. His little toe hurt. Jair sat up, thinking that a crab had bitten him. He looked at his foot, but it wasn't a crab, it was a large shell. Its sharp edge had been pushed between the nail and the skin, probably when he had last thrown a pebble back into the sea. The shell had not cut deeply into the flesh, but when Jair pulled it out carefully his toe started bleeding. He paid no attention to it, however, for what was this that he held in his hand? It was so beautiful that he had no thought for anything else – a lovely round shell, white traced with fine red lines – it was a double shell. It was still closed. And so large! Quite as big as Father's watch, which had once belonged to Grandfather. A double five-piastre find, Jair decided. Yes indeed, a double five-piastre find, as true as my name is Jair.

He tried to open it, but it was shut tight. Jair took out his penknife from the special knife pocket inside his trouser pocket and started picking at the shell. Just under the sharp edge of the lid he managed to open a narrow slit. Then he pushed the shell a bit farther open with the nail of his little finger, and tried to look inside. Unfortunately he could see nothing and the shell sprang shut at once when he withdrew his finger.



“Guess who?” said someone behind him in a soft voice, and at the same moment Jair felt two small hands on his eyes. He was furious with Miriam because of her silly surprise attack. But also with himself! A fine watchman he was, he hadn’t seen her arrive on the beach. He hadn’t even noticed that she was standing so close to him.

“What have you got there?” asked Miriam curiously, unaware of Jair’s anger. She snatched the shell from his hand.

“Be careful!” shouted^d Jair. “You’ll break it. It’s a

beautiful shell. Give it to me! Don't you see it's worth five piastres or maybe even ten!"

"Hassan will only say that he's seen shells like that plenty of times," Miriam replied cattily. Although she was only nine, she was well aware of what was going on in the world around her. She was round and chubby, with gay brown eyes and brown, fluttering hair, and she loved teasing her brother.

"Look, Jair, here's your basket," she called, "I'll unpack it."

Jair took her along to his shade-provider and there they spread out everything for a lovely meal, just like Father had done that morning. Mother had packed grapes and tomatoes in the basket, and, of course, bread. As an extra treat she had added a thick slice of cake. And yes, his book and goggles were there too, right at the bottom. She had forgotten only the harpoon.

While Jair was eating, Miriam sat down beside him. As usual, her tongue was never still, not for a moment.

"I walked a long way round," she said, "no one saw me coming here. Father went away on the bus. He'll be back tonight or perhaps tomorrow. What do you think about us living here? I'm going to walk around in my swimsuit all summer."

Jair looked sternly at her and said, "Don't you know it's a secret? You shouldn't talk about it. Or do you want the whole street to come here as well?"

"Nobody can hear us," answered Miriam carelessly. "Don't be so mean," and she shrugged her shoulders. Then she continued gaily, "I'll tell you something. Grandma Jichje also left on the bus. I walked to the bus stop with Father and she came tottering after us, with Mazal. Grandma Jichje had tidied up her hair in a plait

and she was wearing a lovely embroidered scarf around her head. She really looked nice. Honestly she did, but she was groaning and sighing so loudly, we could hear it all the way."

"And Mazal?" asked Jair.

"Oh, she was stupid, as usual. She walked behind, just as if they didn't belong together. But when her grandma went on the bus she cried a lot and they kissed," chuckled Miriam.

"Is that all? I thought something quite fantastic had happened," said Jair icily. But Miriam didn't hear him. She threw off her blouse and shorts and skipped across the beach in her red swimsuit.

"Catch me, Jair!" she shouted defiantly, running towards the sea. Then as fast as a hare she plunged into the water.

Nothing was further from Jair's mind. He sat down quietly and began to read. He would have all day for the sea. Besides, Miriam – such a little girl – was hardly a match for him! Just think of it! No, you ought to see the competitions which he and his friends organized. Running in the water, long distance swimming, deep diving! They could compete with the best swimming club in the whole country!

Miriam was only flopping about. Just look at her! For a long time she turned round and round like a spinning top, then she lay down on her back, blowing jets of water into the air like a whale. But suddenly she shrieked and started thrashing about wildly. Then she scrambled to her feet and waded back to the beach. She'd already had enough of it. Rubbing her knee, she walked back to Jair, calling to him from a distance, "It was nice! But I've been stung by a jellyfish, I think. I saw a little red fish with a

tail like a fan and then I was stung here," pointing at her knee.

Miriam always tried to catch fish with her hands. It looked so easy when you saw a shoal of fish swimming around you. And yet there was hardly anyone amongst the boys of Tamaria who knew the trick. Jair too had never managed to catch a single fish with his hand. Even with his harpoon it was difficult enough. But then that was such a primitive, childish thing. That would be the day, when he had his automatic harpoon. Then he'd take home to his mother enough fish for a meal every day!

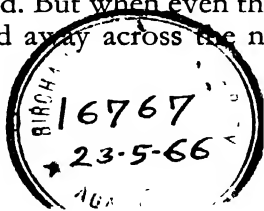
Miriam sat down beside him and begged, "Please, Jair, give me that lovely shell as a present, to sell to Hassan," and she looked enviously at the beautiful, pinkish shell. "I hardly ever find anything nice and you've got all day to look for more."

"Why don't you stay here too, then," suggested Jair. "Then we'll go diving together." He certainly wasn't going to part with his precious find. "You may borrow my goggles," he added.

"No thanks, I don't feel like it just now. In any case, Mother told me not to stay too long. I've got to help her." And again she looked at the coveted shell. "Come on, Jair," she coaxed him, "please give me that shell. I often give you things."

Jair did not deign to answer that. He was suddenly completely absorbed in his book.

Miriam jumped up. "You're not reading at all! You're not reading, you're just pretending!" and she danced around him so that the sand flew on his book and into his eyes. "I'm going to the cinema this afternoon with Jona, hurrah!" she shouted. But when even this seemed to have no effect, she darted away across the now sunny beach,



shouting, "You'd better find yourself another shell before I come back with your lunch. That one is mine!"

The impudence of it! Jair was really angry, and yet he had to laugh. Such a vixen! The beach suddenly looked empty, without that teasing whirlwind.

Jair looked around. He had told his father so bravely that nothing on earth would drag him away from here, but if anyone were really going to make an attack on the beach he wouldn't even have a stick with which to defend himself. Except of course the pole with the nameplate with JOSEEF HARAR on it. But that must stay in position at all cost.

The book was deadly boring. It was impossible to keep his mind on it and he put it down. Through the slits in his wall Jair surveyed the entire beach as if through the loopholes of a fortress. How lonely it was here with those gloomy high hills all around. They looked like gigantic lumps of rock which had been dropped in place from the sky, so that an untidy wall had been formed, full of holes and slits and also with big gaps in between. A wonderful spot to play hide and seek, thought Jair, possibly with the children of their future hotel guests.

Hey, what was that? That blue spot, over there, in the distance! It really looked as if someone were playing hide and seek. Who was creeping along there so cautiously? There, now he had disappeared again, behind the black rock. Quietly Jair kept watching.

Then suddenly he saw who it was. Mazal! He recognized her by her thin, black pigtailed. Mazal, that scared, timid Mazal, Jichje's daughter. It looked as if she was walking around the rock in a circle. Jair was on his guard. Could Jichje have heard something already? Had Mazal come to spy here for her father? What was she up to?

2 *Mazal*

The children of their street thought Mazal was a frightened, odd child, whom they preferred to ignore. She looked like an old woman, they said, and she behaved like one too. She always sat at home, or trudged after her grandmother when they went shopping. She never came out to play and if she happened to meet one of the children, she wouldn't say a word. And at school she sat quietly and sluggishly at her desk.

"She gives herself airs," said Chanele, the grocer's daughter. "I suppose it's because her father is so clever and knows the whole Torah by heart."

"My father is even cleverer," said Jona determinedly. "He knows everything, otherwise he couldn't be the headmaster. But that doesn't make me all high-and-

mighty. I believe she's scared of us. She hardly knows us."

"What nonsense!" exclaimed her step-brother, Raffi. "As if we didn't all know each other in this street. We are the most important people in Tamaria, because we've built the town." And as he said this, he imitated Jichje's croaking voice. All the children burst out laughing.

It was true. Jichje called their street "Pioneers' Street" because almost all the people who lived in it had helped to build Tamaria. They were the founders of the town.

"I know! I know!" squeaked Efroni with his high-pitched voice. He could sing like a lark and that was why he had been given this nickname. His real name was David. "She was born in the Yemen and we're all Israelis."

"We're all Israelis," repeated the children in a confused chorus.

"Ha ha! You were born in Morocco yourself, Efroni!" called one.

"And Raffi in Germany," said another.

"I think Jair was born in Hungary," said Raffi.

"Yes, and Miriam and Jona and Michal in Israel."

"And Chanele . . . what's the name of that place again . . . oh well, what does it matter. Let's stop talking about it, come on." And the children went on playing their ball game.

But no one knew how often Mazal sat crouching behind the window, watching unseen while Miriam and Jona and Efroni's sisters jumped and skipped for all they were worth. Nor could they guess that Mazal was thinking of them every night in bed. Like the pictures in a magic lantern they passed before her eyes.

First came Efroni and his five brothers and sisters. They

shouted so loudly that you would think they spent all their time in quarrelling. But that wasn't so; they only laughed and talked rather loudly.

Then came Shaoul, the sleepy, fat son of Hassan the Turk and Chasila. Chasila was Grandma's friend. But Mazal was dead scared of Shaoul and his friends Jair and Raffi. They were such teases. No, the girls were much nicer, even though they made her feel so shy. So shy that Mazal never knew where to look when they said something to her. Miriam, who was always so wild, Chanele, who put on such ladylike airs, and then Raffi's pretty sisters, Jona and Michal with their thick, fair pigtails and their deep blue eyes.

So, in her mind, Mazal's eyes roved down the street, right down to Shoshanna Mizrahi's baby. How she wished she would be allowed to hold him sometimes. The other girls in the street did it so often.

She also often thought of Nissim. Nissim was the youngest son of Jaffa, who ran a vegetable store. He was a strange boy, not like the other children. He never came out into the street, but always sat in a corner of his mother's shop. Once – when Mazal was buying vegetables with Grandma Cheftziba – he had pushed a tangerine into her hand, without saying a word. But then his mother had come along and had snatched the tangerine out of her hand at once. Nissim had received a hard smack on his ear and had started to howl. Awful! He screamed just like the jackals at night. Mazal had run out of the shop and had quietly gone home. Whenever she came to buy vegetables now, Jaffa treated her as if she just didn't exist. And she always served all the other women in the shop first.

In the dark, her eyes moved to Grandma Cheftziba's big bed. At Grandma's feet slept Mazal's two little

brothers. How she envied those boys! She knew that every morning after breakfast they would hurriedly scamp through their lessons and rush out to their friends. Why was it that she couldn't do that too?

Avram and Efraim – twins – had been only a few months old when Mother had died. Mazal herself had not yet been three. Grandma Cheftziba, Mother's mother, had come to look after the children and had stayed with them ever since. And Grandma took it for granted that Mazal was always at home and helped her in the house. That was how things had been in the Yemen and how things should be. And in any case, Grandma wouldn't dream of letting her granddaughter mix with every Tom, Dick and Harry.

And Jichje, Mazal's father, thought the same. He had been in Israel for over ten years now, but he was no modern Israeli. The children in the street had all



become great friends of Jichje, but it never occurred to him that Mazal might join the gay band. It had even been difficult for him to get used to the idea that his daughter should go to school. Only when he heard that the police took action if parents kept their children at home, had he allowed her to go there. He didn't think it was at all unusual that Mazal never even went out of doors in the holidays, nor ever asked whether she could go for a swim. In fact, he had forbidden the two brothers to go swimming. It seemed dangerous to him and besides, he thought that young children shouldn't go too far from home. So it was a good thing he couldn't now see his daughter wandering about on the beach by the black rock . . .

That morning Jichje had come home from his night watch earlier than usual. Normally he said his morning prayers quickly and crept into bed at once. Today, however, he sat down at the table and began to sing psalms in a loud voice. He pushed the stools backwards and forwards and made so much noise that Grandma couldn't go back to sleep. When he had woken her up properly, he said, "You're going on a journey today, Mother Cheftziba. It's high time you went to see your daughter in Amichai. How long ago is it since you were there last?"

The old woman watched him with blinking eyes. Nervously she smoothed back her greasy grey hair which fell in tufts on to the yellow, furrowed cheeks. At last she said, "What makes you say that all of a sudden? Who's going to look after my poor grandchildren? And who's going to do the washing for my customers? No, Jichje, I won't hear of it. I'm not going," she concluded fiercely.

"But you'll have to, Mother Cheftziba. We can manage for a while. Thank you very much, though. Mazal is a big

girl now. She can easily look after her brothers and do the washing. As for myself, I'll manage, thank you."

Jichje remained relentless, no matter how much Grandma lamented that she didn't know the way, that she would get lost, that she was afraid of buses and that her money would be stolen. It was no use. Jichje only shrugged his shoulders.

"Money," he said. "There won't be much left. Not when you have to buy a ticket to the north in Be'er Shewa. And you're quite capable of keeping an eye on your belongings. Here's a ticket to Be'er Shewa. It's a present," he said, giving her the ticket. He had bought it cheaply from the second nightwatchman, whose daughter – who had wanted to go to the north – had suddenly fallen ill. A wonderful opportunity! "The bus leaves at half past six," he added, "so you'll have to hurry."

When he saw that Grandma wasn't going to move, he went to a chest by the wall. He took a grey striped headscarf and spread it out on the floor. Then he began to rummage in Grandma's things. That helped!

Grandma Cheftziba got up. Showering streams of abuse and lamentations upon her son-in-law, she started to pack her belongings. There wasn't much. A long vest, a short bodice, and her best clothes – a beautifully embroidered dress, worn over trousers, the legs of which were decorated right up to the top. Then a few black, white and flowered headscarves and a variety of odd pieces of cloth. She put everything on the grey striped scarf; on top came her little bag with jewels, and a torn purse. Then she tied the four corners together. It was a neat little bundle.

Jichje went to wake Mazal, who had in fact been awake for a long time, but had pretended to be asleep. "Come on, Mazal, Grandma is going on a journey, to Aunt Batshewa

in Amichai. Get up quickly, get dressed and take her to the bus-stop."

Mazal's eyes filled with tears, but Jichje pretended not to notice. "Come on," he urged her. "Heat the coffee and cut some bread!"

Grandma Cheftziba shook her head. She didn't want anything. And Mazal's throat, too, seemed to be squeezed tight. Father was simply turning Grandma out of the house! She realized that only too well. He was sending her away. So it was true what Grandma and Chasila had said. Father wanted to marry again! Yes, that's what they had said. When Grandma and Chasila were peeling potatoes together or sewing, they always gossiped for hours on end. Usually Mazal was near them and listened attentively to their animated chatter. She remembered very well that Grandma had talked of Father's marriage plans. It had been when the new Yemenite family, the Shimonis, had come to live in Tamaria. The Shimonis had a grown-up daughter and were hoping to find a good Yemenite husband for her. Chasila thought that Channa Shimoni was much too young to be the mother of a family of three children. "What should Jichje, a man who knows the Bible off by heart, want with a wife like Channa?" Chasila had asked indignantly. Channa was a modern girl, that was quite clear. Chasila and Grandma shook their heads when talking about Channa, and Mazal agreed, even though she had never seen Channa. And then Grandma had said – yes, she could see it only too clearly – that once Channa had children of her own, Grandma's own grandchildren would go hungry . . .

Grandma Cheftziba wasn't making much progress with her packing. She kept re-opening the bundle, taking

something out or putting something in, until Jichje picked up the parcel and threatened to throw it outside. But at last she began to tidy up her hair and put on – oh, so slowly – her headscarf, with its beautiful embroidery of flowers and stars. Then she took up her bundle once again, opened it and fumbled in it for her chain of olive-wood and her handkerchief. And then she had to fish out her purse, which, of course, had slipped right down to the bottom. Jichje stormed and raged, but in the end he pushed her out of the door, bundle and all.

In the meantime Mazal had got dressed, and now walked slowly behind Grandma. She hoped they would be late for the bus. No such luck! There were many people at the bus-stop and the bus was still there. They were all pushing each other in order to get to the best seats. It was a long journey, all the way to the north.

Crying, Grandma Cheftziba entered the bus; she took the only empty seat. After a few minutes the bus moved off.

Mazal felt too wretched to wave and stared blankly at the departing bus. Slowly she walked back. Of course she met a number of people she knew – Miriam, Jona, Shaoul with Shelomo, Efroni's eldest brother – and they all looked so cheerful! There was no school and so they were happy. Only Mazal was sad. She could think of nothing else except that Grandma had gone away.

When Mazal came home, she saw at once that her brothers were gone. Their bed was a muddle of sheets and clothes and on the table lay some crumbled bread. She looked into the other room, which had only an open doorway. She saw her father lying on the bench in the corner; he was asleep. He hadn't even bothered to push

the screen of sacking in front of his bed. In the window a cloth hung from two nails, so that the room was half dark.

How unbearably silent and empty the house was. Mazal felt deeply unhappy and deserted now that Grandma wasn't there. She gazed with resentment at her sleeping father. It was all his fault. Of course, she ought not to think that, but she couldn't help it. Suddenly she saw something which made her heart beat violently. It made her arms and legs ache. The box in which Father kept Mother's jewels and his money was standing on the table, wide open. Father must have forgotten to put it back into the cupboard, after he had taken Grandma's money out of it. Just think – someone might easily have walked in and stolen it! Father must have been very tired, not to have thought of this. He always said, "If you put temptation in the path of a thief, you are worse than the thief himself."

Mazal pressed her lips together and walked soundlessly to the box. Very carefully, with stiff arms, she picked it up and put it down on the table in the other room. There were coins in the box and also some banknotes. And yes, there was the little white bag containing the jewels for which she was looking. Grandma had shown it to her once.

There was Mother's broad golden Yemenite ring with the little buds which glittered like diamonds, and the twin rings as well. Mother used to wear them on her little fingers, because her hands were so swollen by illness. Grandma had told her all this. There was the necklace which was to be for Mazal herself when she was grown up. Carefully she put the golden necklace on the table and looked at it in admiration. It looked like a broad maze of links, covered with bright stones, and amongst these was

Mother's bridal coin. Mazal stroked the coin. It had a hole bored in it and it hung exactly in the middle of the necklace.

Grandma Cheftziba had told her about Father's and Mother's wedding. They had drunk in turns from a cup of wine, while the whole family and all the wedding guests were standing around them, singing. Mother drank last and found her wedding coin on the bottom of the cup. That had been in the Yemen. Here in Israel Father would have no need of a wedding coin. He would have to buy a smooth wedding ring, such as everybody wore, thought Mazal. That was to say, if he really did want to get married.

Mazal let her eyes wander once more over the treasures before carefully putting them back into the white bag. She was just going to return the bag to the box when she saw something else lying at the bottom, a small parcel wrapped in a piece of white paper, tied up with some thread. For one moment Mazal hesitated, then she took it out of the box and held it in her hand. She pulled the thread loose, unfolded the tissue paper . . . and on that white paper glittered the thing she had just been thinking about! A plain ring! An engagement ring, a wedding ring!

Then it was really true. Now she saw it with her own eyes. Father was going to get married and Grandma . . . Grandma would probably never come back. A stranger would be in charge of the house. Who knew what would become of her brothers and herself? No, she wouldn't let that happen! Suddenly Mazal made up her mind. She put the jewels where they belonged and took the box back to the table in the other room. But the ring she kept in her hand.

On the veranda on to which both rooms opened, a heap of junk lay next to a pile of washing. Mazal found a small empty tin. Quickly she slipped the ring into it and with the tin in her hand she softly sneaked through the room and the adjoining passage out into the street.

No one, seeing her walking down the road, would have guessed that she had just stolen a ring and that she was going to hide it somewhere. But where?

Mazal remembered that the previous year she had helped her father load sand which he had to take to the nursery school. It was lovely sand. They had taken it from a small beach, some way out of town. They had stopped by a black rock. She saw the spot quite clearly in her mind's eye. What was it again that Father had told the boys? Yes, this was it: "Look Avram and Efraim, the Lord reminds people through this rock that God has created the world. They forget it sometimes. If human beings had made this beach with this chain of rocks, they would have said, 'That will do now. Why should there be any more rocks here?' But our Lord isn't stingy, either with rocks or stones. For it has been written: 'The world has been built on stone and for each stone there is a reason.'" Yes, that was what her father had said, standing by the black rock where they had got the sand.

She would go there now, she decided. To the black rock, and there she would bury the ring. Maybe that was another reason why God had created the black rock. And, she mused on, if Father was unable to find the ring, he couldn't give it to Channa and so he couldn't get married. For of course, he wouldn't be able to buy another ring so quickly. Naturally, Father would be furious when he found out that the ring was gone. What would he think? That it

had been stolen . . . ? Later, much later, she would put the ring back into the box.

Mazal hurried along the street, keeping close to the walls of the houses, and turned into the same road as Jair and his father had taken that morning.

3 ❧ *An Encounter*

Jair's first impulse was to give Mazal, that timid child, a good fright by suddenly jumping forward from behind his wall. But he had second thoughts. The main thing was to try to find out whether Jichje had heard of Father's plan already, and whether he had sent Mazal out to explore! So he decided to wait and see.

He stayed quietly where he was. He wasn't afraid of her, but that stupid Mazal wouldn't come any nearer. She kept walking around and around the black rock. Sometimes she knelt down, and then she got up again. It seemed as if she was looking for something. What could she be doing? Jair wondered.

Mazal searched and searched and soon she had found a suitable little hole for the vegetable tin containing the

ring. But she could not bring herself to leave it just as it was, covered only with a little sand. Suppose she were unable to find the place again? Mazal looked around for something which might serve to identify the spot. Unfortunately there was nothing there except greyish-brown stones and dull, dark sand.

Preoccupied, Mazal looked around. Suddenly she realized that she was very close to the sea. Nearer the sea the sand became more beautiful, and clearer, and she saw shells scattered everywhere. Shells – she could cover the hole with some of those! It was the obvious thing, to use shells, so that she could easily recognize the spot and find the hiding-place again.

Holding the ring in the tissue paper – the tin she left behind for the time being – Mazal walked hesitantly towards the blue water. Slowly, very slowly, as if she didn't really want to, she went on. She was a little frightened, on the open, wide beach. She had felt safer in the protection of the rock.

Jair, still at his post, decided that this was getting too much. He was convinced she was spying. And he wasn't going to let her have a close look at the notice on the pole. True, Father had said that the group was practically his because he had put that notice there, but suppose Mazal told her father about it . . . what then? Well, Jichje might come tomorrow or even tonight, and put a nameplate up as well. You could be dead sure of that. And then there would be no advantage for either of them. No, it was better not to let them see the nameplate at all. Wait, he would chase her away in no time. He jumped up, and with one leap across the stones he suddenly stood right in front of Mazal. She started violently and couldn't move a step. It was as if she were nailed to the ground.

Where had that boy suddenly come from? She simply didn't understand. Stiffly she held her hands behind her back and looked at Jair with large, frightened eyes. It almost made Jair feel guilty but he didn't let himself be put out.

"What are you doing here?" he asked in a gruff voice. "This is private ground." Miriam or Jona would have replied to this, "Private ground? Don't be daft. The beach and the sea belong to all of us."

But Mazal didn't say a single word. She looked at Jair, puzzled, then began hurriedly to move backwards, away from him. A little farther away she stopped. What could she do? With Jair standing there watching her she could hardly put the ring in the hiding-place. She would have liked to turn around and run home. But that ring . . . what should she do with it?

Sadly Mazal stared at the sea. She would have liked to walk into the water and throw the ring far, far into the sea. But no, she must not do that. The ring belonged to Father. He had paid a lot of money for it. And maybe Channa Shimoni would go away after a while and Grandma would come back. Then she would put the ring back into the cupboard without anyone noticing.

Jair didn't know what to think. A fine spy was Mazal! She hardly dared to move. And why was she keeping her hands so stiffly behind her back? Maybe she was hiding something and she thought he was a beachcomber? In any case he must see to it that she kept away from the pole.

"Why don't you go swimming?" he asked, somewhat friendlier now. "Or look for shells," he continued. "You can find much nicer ones here than on the big beach. Come on," he suggested, "I'll show you where." And

with a quick movement he pulled off his shirt and threw it over the nameplate. There, Father's name was covered now.

"Are you coming?" he said again, walking towards the sea. Slowly and hesitantly Mazal followed him.

"Haven't you got a bathing-suit on?" asked Jair, with his feet already in the water. Incredible that she shouldn't be wearing a bathing-suit under her clothes, he thought. Mazal shook her head.

"Well, then you'd better look near the edge here," he suggested. He began to feel as if he were dealing with a deaf-mute, although he knew better. Not a single word had passed her lips yet.

"Why don't you take your shoes off?" he tried again. Mazal was of two minds. Should she? What would Grandma say? She looked at Jair, who was now lying on his back in the water, gazing up at the sky, and then she looked at her own legs and feet. Those awful thick stockings and shoes! Suddenly she sat down on the beach and began to undo her shoelaces.

A little later she stood with her thin brown legs in the water. Wonderful! She was enraptured when she discovered the glitter of the array of pebbles under the water. The sea was full of surprises to her. It seemed as if she had never seen it before. The water rolled in blue and green waves before her eyes and white crests danced in the sun. It was quite a different Mazal standing there, and Jair watched her in utter amazement.

Mazal stretched her arms and wanted to clap her hands in sheer delight, but she was still holding the ring in her hand. Now she remembered that she must collect shells to cover the hiding-place by the rock. Quickly she bent over and began busily to fish the beautiful pebbles out of

the water. Also she found shells and pieces of white and brown coral which lay amongst the pebbles.

A little farther on a lovely oval shell caught her eye. Mazal stretched out as far as she could and just clutched the shell when her foot slipped away in the soft sand between the stones. There she was, lying in the water! Jair heard a scream and hurried towards her. He had almost forgotten he was dealing with a spy. But Mazal had scrambled to her feet in the meantime. When Jair got there she was kneeling in the water, digging frantically amongst the pebbles.

"Hey, what's the matter? What are you looking for?" he called. "Your dress is getting wet."

"The ring," cried Mazal, "I've lost the ring!"

At once Jair knelt down beside her in the water, threw the pebbles aside and began to sieve the sand through his fingers. "Did you have it on your finger?" he asked. "Was it too big or something?"

"No," wailed Mazal, "in a piece of paper. I had it in my hand." Jair shrugged his shoulders. What a crazy idea, to walk into the water holding something in your hand. You were bound to lose it.

"There! There's something floating there, perhaps that's it!" he shouted suddenly, at the same time leaping in pursuit of something white. It was indeed the tissue paper which had contained the ring – a soaked little rag with the red string still partly tied around it. When Mazal saw it she covered her face with her hands.

"The ring has fallen out," she said desperately. "It's gone." And again she began to look amongst the stones.

"Stay where you are," Jair called to her, and ran to his wall. He was back in a moment with his goggles – a round piece of glass set in blue rubber. Quickly he put them on.

Then he lay down on his stomach and put his head down into the water. Zig-zagging he shuffled across the stones, seeing everything under the surface very sharply and clearly, as if through a magnifying glass: every grain of sand, every minute shell, every pebble . . . and between them he saw something sparkle. The ring! There was the ring, lying on a bed of sand. Jair picked it up carefully and slipped it on his finger. In a second he was standing up-right again.

"Look, Mazal!" he shouted, running towards the beach. "What have I got on my finger?"

Mazal rushed towards him. "Give it to me!" she screamed.

Was this the same Mazal? Hardly recognizable, Jair thought. She had been so dull and scared only a moment ago . . . and now . . . fire and flames, Mother would say. Jair put his hand with the ring behind his back.

"First tell me what you want it for," he teased.

"Give it to me," repeated Mazal, on the point of tears. "Give it to me!"

Jair examined the ring on his finger attentively and asked, "Whose is it?" There was no answer. "Have you stolen it?"

Mazal stood before him as if struck by lightning. A thief – did that boy think she was a thief? "I don't steal," she said harshly. "Yemenites don't steal!" and she glared furiously at him.

Jair was taken aback for a moment, but recovered quickly. "I didn't mean it," he explained. "But you're so mysterious about it."

"It's a wedding ring," Mazal told him, and she went on, "it belongs to my father. I'm hiding it for a while so that my father can't give it to Channa Shimoni."



"Oh, does he want to get married to Channa Shimoni?" Jair understood. Mazal nodded.

"But if your father wants to get married he can do it without a ring," said Jair knowingly. "He could borrow one, couldn't he?"

Mazal shook her head. "Father wouldn't do that," she said firmly.

"Why don't you want him to get married? You don't have a mother," he asked hesitantly.

Mazal looked down and answered, "We used to have our grandmother. That's almost exactly like a mother. We don't need a new mother," she concluded.

Jair was thinking of his friend Raffi. He had a step-mother and you could only tell because Raffi sometimes called her by her first name. Otherwise it was just as if she were a real mother. But Mazal looked so upset that he preferred not to say any more about it.

"Why didn't you leave the ring in the sea then?" he began. "Then you would have got rid of it."

"No," said Mazal, shocked. "I couldn't. It belongs to my father. I'll give it back later on. I only wanted to bury it until then."

Jair couldn't make much sense of it, but he grew more and more interested. "Oh, so that's why you were messing about by that rock all the time. Were you going to hide it there?"

"Yes," said Mazal. "And then I was going to cover up the hole with shells," pointing to the little mound of shells she had thrown on the beach. She suddenly felt relieved now that she had been able to tell somebody the secret of the ring. She wasn't scared of the ring any more. Jair was full of enthusiasm.

"Shells on a rock!" he exclaimed. "But then you'll

never see your ring again. The tourists who come here admire everything they see. Nothing is safe from them. At least, that's what Hassan says. When they find shells on a rock they'll think that it is a natural wonder or something. And then they'll take the whole lot away for their museum, including your ring. Maybe they won't find it before they've returned to America. And how would you ever get it back then?" He looked triumphantly at Mazal.

Mazal plucked at the wet dress which was clinging to her legs. Jair was right, she had to admit. The rock was not a good hiding-place. She looked unhappily at him and asked, "What should I do then?"

Jair had sat down, but now he jumped up again. He had an idea. "You know what? We'll hide it in the sea," he exclaimed enthusiastically. "A terrific idea! Look, over there where the water turns green, there are corals on the bottom. Enormous forests of them. Haven't you ever seen them? You know what we're going to do?" We'll simply hang the ring on a coral. I'll tie it up fast with a strong piece of wire, so that it can't possibly float away. What do you think of that? Don't you think it's a splendid idea?"

Mazal had listened to this flood of words in baffled amazement. She looked up at him with large eyes. At last she managed to say, doubtfully, "Under the water?"

"Yes, why not? Since I've got my goggles. Look, it's got a breathing-tube as well, so that I can stay under water as long as I like. Would you like to see how it works? Here, you put them on," and he handed her the goggles.

Mazal looked from Jair to the goggles, was silent, and did not move. Jair put the goggles on her and showed her how to fasten the breathing-tube under the rubber band.

"You only need a bathing-suit now and you could go straight into the water and hide the ring!" he shouted. Suddenly he burst out laughing. Mazal looked so funny with her soaking wet, clinging dress and those goggles on.

Mazal hastily took the goggles off. "I can't swim," she said humbly, "and I don't have a bathing-suit either."

Jair reflected for a moment. Mazal was a lot older than Miriam, but not much bigger. And then she was so terribly thin. Maybe Miriam wouldn't mind lending her bathing-suit to Mazal. Or else Mother might think of something.

"Are you coming again tomorrow?" he asked finally. "Then I'll bring you a bathing-suit and I'll show you a wonderful place to hide the ring. Right over there, where the corals begin. You can only just about stand there."

Mazal couldn't believe her ears. Tomorrow, tomorrow she would have a bathing-suit and go into the sea . . . just like other children.

"But how can we find you a pair of goggles?" said Jair and looked pensively into the distance. Raffi, it occurred to him. Raffi, too, had a pair of goggles. He must try to get hold of them. Without saying what he wanted them for, of course. Because he couldn't tell Raffi about that ring and about the new mother whom Mazal didn't want . . .

"Raffi has a stepmother too," he spoke his thoughts aloud.

"What?" said Mazal surprised. "Raffi and Jona?"

"No," Jair explained. "Not Jona. She and Michal are the children of the second mother. If you didn't know you would never guess!" He waited a moment, then he asked, "Well what about it? Are you coming tomorrow?"

Mazal's face darkened. Would she manage to get away

tomorrow?. And where could she leave the ring all that time?

Jair, standing beside her, suddenly turned around. "There's someone coming. Oh, it's Miriam. I suppose it's my lunch." He put his hand to his mouth with a start. He had almost let the cat out of the bag then. What would Mazal think of his not going home to eat?

But it hadn't occurred to Mazal that this was at all odd. Lunch! It startled her. Was it as late as that? Father must have awakened a long time ago. How could she sneak back into the house unnoticed? Had she left the jewel box open or had she shut it? And the ring? She daren't keep it with her. She made a quick decision and put the ring into Jair's hand.

"Please," she whispered. "You keep it for me, please. And don't tell anyone. I'll come back tomorrow."

And before Jair could count three, she had picked up her shoes and stockings and was away, her bare feet running across the sandy beach, along by the black rock and past Miriam, who stared after her open-mouthed.

Jair, too, was left completely bewildered. Fancy running away like that and leaving him to do the job for her! Really, she was just like all the other girls. Now he was stuck with that ring. And Miriam, that nosy sister of his, was almost here. Where could he leave the thing in the meantime?

He rushed behind the wall, snatched up his trousers and felt for the knife-pocket. But even before he had wormed his knife out of it, he had a better idea. The shell he had found that morning, the double shell! That would be an ideal hiding-place. He took the shell in his hand and split it open a little with his nail. Then he pushed the ring through the narrow gap, pressed carefully, and – snap –

the ring slipped right in. Luckily, the two halves of the shell had not come apart. Jair then pressed it tight shut – the ring was inside it like a pearl in an oyster. Now he must try to glue it with something, for the two halves were bound to get loose.

Here came Miriam, scampering along in excitement. Quickly he put the shell in his pocket and looked innocently over the wall. He pretended he had only just noticed Miriam.

With a thud she flopped down in front of the wall, still holding her shopping-basket.

“I say, Jair,” she began at once, “what was Mazal doing here? Tell me quickly . . .”

4 ❧ *A Quarrel with Consequences*

Jair lifted the shopping-basket and examined the contents without answering Miriam's question. He pretended he hadn't heard, and concentrated on the basket. Then he found something so important that he really did forget to answer his sister's question. At the bottom he had found a yoghurt jar with a raw egg in it. What luck that Mother thought raw eggs were so good for him. There was no better glue than raw white of egg! "Come on, Jair!" Miriam cried.

"What are you talking about?" asked Jair rather stupidly.

"About Mazal, silly. What was she doing here?"

"Oh, Mazal? She . . . er . . . she came to get some sand to scrub saucepans, I think," answered Jair nonchalantly.

Well, that couldn't be true. Who would be so mad as to come all the way here to get sand for scrubbing when the large beach was so much nearer? And Mazal had no bag or container with her to put the sand in. So Miriam looked at Jair and said, "You're kidding, getting sand!"

"All right then, she didn't," answered Jair, taking a piece of bread from the bag. He certainly wasn't going to betray Mazal's secret. Besides, Miriam was always far too nosy. It was very good for her not to be told everything.

So Miriam still didn't know anything, and this made her furious. She looked angrily at her brother. But he didn't utter a word. He was chewing away all the time, unperturbed.

"Silly idiot!" Miriam snapped. She could have hit him. But Jair was so strong. Actually, she didn't quite know what to do. That nasty boy! And without deigning to look at him again, she walked across the beach, and into the sea. The sharp, cold water cooled her down a little, but it didn't make her any better tempered. Oh no! Suddenly she remembered she had another grievance against Jair – the shell which he wouldn't give her to sell to Hassan! She had begged him for it this morning. All right, if he didn't want to give her the shell, then he'd better come with her now to dive for shells. He had suggested it himself. Just wait, she would find out whether he had really meant it.

"Jair," she shouted from afar. "Jair! You promised to come and dive for shells. Where are you now? Bring the goggles!"

Did she really expect Jair to jump up at once at her orders? Miriam looked and saw that he was hiding behind

the wall. He must still be having his lunch, for the jar with the raw egg was standing on top of the wall. Just you wait, my boy, I'll tip it over on to your head, thought Miriam, revengefully. Serve you right, that sticky mess in your hair and on your face. A whole egg!

Cautiously she crept nearer. She must be careful that he wouldn't notice her. Just a little farther and she would be there. She stretched out her hand, but at the same moment Jair, too, reached for the jar. Their hands knocked against each other, the jar was pushed off the wall, and rolled into the sand.

"What *are* you doing?"

"What are *you* doing?"

"Nothing!" replied Jair. He was really startled.

"Why don't you drink the egg raw?" asked Miriam. "Are you cooking it in the sun?"

"Oh . . . er, I've glued . . . er . . . my book with it. There were some loose pages in it. No, don't touch it," and he hastily stopped Miriam from picking up the book. "It isn't dry yet."

"How can you glue things with an egg? How do you do it? Let me see," Miriam badgered him.

"No," and Jair hastily picked up the jar from the sand and put it, dirty as it was, into the bag. "Here you are. You can take the bag home."

"Show me that shell again."

"No."

"Come and look for shells then," Miriam nagged. "You promised me this morning."

"Yes, this morning I wanted to go looking for shells with you but you didn't want to. And now *I* don't want to. And now you can hop it. You've got no business to keep spying on me all the time," Jair burst out.

"Spying!" Miriam seethed with indignation. How did he get that idea into his head! A lot of spying there was to be done on a chap who was always reading or eating. What a pity she hadn't managed to throw that egg on his head . . . "You can make as many dates with Mazal as you like, I don't care. You're girl-crazy. Pahl!" shouted Miriam, walking off.

Jair watched her go. He felt that he had been a bit too sharp. He hadn't meant to be. But she had surprised him just as he was sealing the shell with the white of egg. That was the second time today she'd done that! And, of course, the whole egg had fallen into the sand. That was her fault too. Oh well, in any case the shell would remain closed until tomorrow, and that was the main thing.

As he put the shell carefully on the wall to dry, he decided to give Miriam something from his collection when he got home, as a peace offering. Then she could sell it to Hassan if she wanted to.

In the evening, when Jair came home with his good intentions, he saw that Miriam would not be so easily pacified. She behaved as if he weren't there and didn't say a word to him. While Jair, like a hungry wolf, attacked the large plateful of potatoes and salad with sour cream, which Mother had put before him, he told them about his long day on the beach. No one had come to look at their new piece of ground and the nameplate was still there, untouched. Father would be pleased to hear about it. The attack came unexpectedly.

"And what about Mazal?" said Miriam tartly, who had suddenly found her tongue again.

Jair turned a bright red, and Mother looked at him in surprise.

"Oh, yes, Mazal," he said quickly, "she didn't even see the nameplate. She . . . er . . . never even came as far as that."

"What was she doing there?" Mother asked.

"Oh, getting some sand," answered Jair. It sounded rather vague and Mother did not pursue the matter. But Jair didn't like lying to his mother and therefore he quickly went on talking. He told her how he had lured Mazal away from the danger point – the pole with the nameplate – and had gone to look for shells with her. He didn't even notice that Miriam had begun to look angrier and angrier.

Miriam almost choked with rage. So that was it! He had gone to look for shells with Mazal, while he had been keeping secrets from her, his own sister.

"It's all lies," she burst out. "He's lying, Mother. I've seen it myself, Mazal was standing right by the pole."

"But she didn't see it, I tell you," repeated Jair. "Honestly, Mother, you can believe me."

Miriam jerked her chair back, jumped up from the table and rushed through the open door into the other room, where she flung herself down on her bed. Mother and Jair stayed behind in silence.

"It's the heat," Mother whispered to Jair. "And the holidays . . ." she continued calmly, "you're both suffering from too much spare time."

Jair looked indignantly at her.

"Yes, it's true, my boy. You can have too much leisure. But listen, I wouldn't fight about it any more tonight if I were you," she advised him. "You're both so stubborn. You'd better go to bed now. It'll be an early day again tomorrow!" Jair took Mother's advice and went to bed.

It was night.

"Miriam!" said a voice suddenly.

Miriam sat up with a jerk. Her head and pulse thumped with fright. Someone had called her name, in her ear, very loudly! She looked around the moonlit room, but saw no one. No, there was nobody standing by her bed. Had she dreamed it?

She daren't get out of bed. The room looked so strange in the white light, unrecognizable and eerie. Against the wall, where the cupboard usually stood, there was now a tall, ink-black thing . . . and on it there were white, ghost-like shapes which seemed to be moving towards her.

The room and the house remained silent. Only Jair made a slight movement. Relieved, Miriam took a deep breath. Now she wasn't afraid to sit up. Those white shapes must be Jair's corals. And the shape by the wall wasn't an ink-black tall, weird thing, but their own familiar cupboard; their sanctuary in which they kept their toys and Jair his carpentry tools and his fishing gear.

Miriam pulled the sheet up and made herself comfortable. She wasn't frightened any longer. She yawned sleepily and finally shut her eyes. But then the room became filled with the buzzing of voices, they were hard, quarrelsome voices, coming closer and closer. She winced. What a dreadful night! Why couldn't she go to sleep? Had she better call Mother? Resolutely she jumped out of bed. When her bare feet touched the cool floor, she came to her senses. The sound didn't come from outside, it was only the quarrel with Jair which was running through her head. That quarrel was still smouldering like an unextinguished fire! No wonder it haunted her in the quiet room.

And Jair was sleeping so peacefully as if he were utterly

blameless. And yet it was his fault, yes, it was! Miriam's cheeks began to glow again when she thought of Jair. Fancy Jair, keeping secrets from her, plotting with that awful, silly child with her ridiculous long dresses and her frightened face.

Miriam glared at her sleeping brother. And why hadn't he shown her that lovely shell again? Wait, she'd manage to have another look all right. Jair put everything he found on show on the cupboard and left it there for a few days, before selecting what he wanted to sell to Hassan.

She walked on tiptoe to the cupboard. Between the corals glistened pieces of mica and in the moonlight the petrified lumps of salt looked like tiny rocks. Farther back, there was a small heap of snail-shells and other shells. They were for Hassan, she knew. But the new one wasn't there.

Miriam reflected, staring at the stool on which Jair's clothes lay. Had he left the shell in his trousers pocket when he went to bed? She must have a look! Hurriedly she picked up Jair's trousers and sat down on the bed. One pocket was full of pebbles and rubbish and in the other were his knife, a handkerchief, and . . . yes . . . under the handkerchief was the shell, in a piece of paper!

Quickly she pulled off the paper which stuck to the edge of the shell. Of course, Miriam realized, it was the glue with which the living animal in the shell kept the two halves together. Jair had explained it once to her. There must be one of those little animals in this shell, you could tell, for it was tightly shut. She held the shell to her ear and shook it gently. What was that? It sounded as if something tinkled inside. It was a tiny little sound. Would that be the animal? She tried it again, carefully. Yes! Something was singing in the shell! The animal was singing! Listen! Ting-a-ling!

It was a singing shell and Jair hadn't realized! She had discovered it! She could see what was inside if she opened it only a little bit . . . if she made only a very small slit with the tip of Jair's knife. But as she fumbled for the knife, she suddenly stopped as still as a mouse. Footsteps sounded in the quiet street. Who could it be? Father? He had said he would come back if possible, even if it was midnight.

The footsteps stopped in front of their house. Miriam's heart began to beat wildly. No, her conscience wasn't so very clear. Father must not find her awake like this.

As swift as lightning, she put the shell on the cupboard behind a large coral, stuffed the rest of Jair's belongings in the pockets, threw the clothes on the stool and hopped into bed. She pulled the sheet high up to her face, and only just in time, for that was the sound of the key, turning in the door. Later on she would put the shell back into Jair's pocket, and with that thought she dropped off to sleep.

It was bright daylight when Miriam awoke. Jair's bed was empty and neatly made. Voices were calling Jair from outside, and there was a loud bang on the door.

"Jair, where are you! Jair! Miriam! Open up!"

Why didn't Mother put a stop to that racket, thought Miriam grumpily. But then she realized that Mother wasn't in, otherwise she would have opened the door and sent that noisy bunch packing.

On her bare feet she ran to the door and opened it a crack. The group of boys with whom Jair usually went to look for shells, Raffi, Efroni and Shaoul, Etan – the grocer's eldest son – and Jair's classmates Chaim and Joram, were all crowded in front of the door.

"Jair isn't in," Miriam said curtly.

"Not in? Again? Where is he, then?" asked Raffi.

"Er . . . er . . . he's helping Father at work," answered Miriam.

"Your father? Has he come back then? He went away yesterday. Shaoul saw him going away on the bus. I say, what is all this?" said Raffi sharply.

"If Jair's not helping Father he's doing shopping for Mother," Miriam said fiercely. "Hurry up, I've got to get dressed." She wanted to shut the door, but Raffi – quicker than she – put his foot in the door and wriggled inside.

"I'll kick him out of bed!" he shouted, dashing into the room. He stopped in front of Jair's tidy bed, dumbfounded. "What? He's not here then?"

Miriam, who had slipped into the bathroom, left him alone. Raffi was just like one of the family. As long as people could remember, big fat Raffi, with his brown eyes and black curls, and the fair-haired Jair had been bosom friends. The two had no secrets from each other. So Miriam didn't mind leaving Raffi nosing about in their room. But suddenly she remembered something and shouted, "Raffi, don't touch anything! Jair will be angry!"

In the meantime Raffi had planted himself in front of Jair's collection. He knew it as well as his own. Lovingly, his fingers went over the green pieces of copperstone, which they had brought home from a visit to a coppermine.

"Where are those pieces of flint Jair found the other day?" he asked Miriam, who had come rushing back into the room. "Oh, and where did he find this?" Now the fat was in the fire. Raffi had discovered the shell. She had remembered too late that it was still lying on the cupboard. She had gone to sleep with the intention of putting

it back where she had found it. If Jair missed it, she would really be in trouble. And of course Raffi would want to know exactly where Jair had found that beautiful shell.

"It's a singing shell," she said quickly, in order to distract Raffi. "Listen." Miriam snatched the shell from his hand and made it tinkle by his ear.

"Give it to me!" shouted Raffi excitedly. "I want to hear it for myself!"

A knock on the door interrupted them. "Joseef Harar," called a voice. "Sign for a parcel please."

Miriam hurried to the door. "Father isn't in," she said timidly to the man outside. He was carrying a roll of paper under his arm.

"Never mind," answered the man good-naturedly. "I suppose you can write, can't you? Just put your name here," and he gave her a pencil. When Miriam had signed the receipt he handed her the roll of paper. "Give my regards to your father, dear, and please put the drawing carefully on the table."

Surprised, Miriam fingered the large roll in her hand. A drawing? What did Father want it for? Curiously, she tried to look between the rolled-up layers of paper, but she could see nothing except numbers and lines. She went to the kitchen and put the roll on the cupboard. There she saw a plate with two sandwiches and a tomato. There was a note, too.

"Miriam," Miriam read aloud, "*Take some milk from the refrigerator. You were so fast asleep we couldn't wake you up. Father came home last night.*" I know that, thought Miriam. "*I'm going out with him now to deliver some things. Jair went to the beach very early this morning. You must stay at home to wait for a drawing which is going to be delivered for Father.*" It has already come, she said to herself. "*So don't leave before*

that drawing has arrived. I shall be back by noon. Bye-bye. Mother."

As she was reading Mother's note, Miriam heard the boys outside shouting to Raffi. She stuffed a sandwich into her mouth and went back to the room with the tomato in her hand.

Raffi was standing by the window like a market vendor, holding up the shell for the boys to see. They were all stretching their necks to have a better view. "See here the secret of the famous diver, Jair," Miriam heard him calling out. "A singing shell!"

"Mind, Raffi!" shouted Miriam. "Give it to me! It's going to get broken."

Raffi held the shell cupped in both hands. "Worth at least ten piastres. I'd like to know where he got it. Isn't he going to sell it?" he asked Miriam.

"Yes he is," answered Miriam. "When he comes back, I suppose."

"Where's he gone? We just heard that three big cars with tourists will be arriving soon. Efroni's father told him. They're factory workers from Haifa. That's why we want to go to Hassan at once. He must have heard it too. And you know yourself what he's like, Miriam. On a day like this he'll buy everything we've got, but afterwards he'll be as mean and stingy as ever. You know what? I'll take this shell."

The boys outside were getting impatient. "Raffi, are you coming or aren't you?" they shouted. "Jair can go to blazes if he doesn't want to come. We're going!"

"Shall I sell it for Jair, then?" Raffi asked Miriam, looking at her in a way that made it quite clear that he didn't feel like putting the shell back on the cupboard.

But Miriam suddenly grabbed it out of his hands and

said excitedly, "I'm coming too, I'm going to sell it myself!"

Her mind was made up. If Raffi said that Hassan would be less generous later on, then wouldn't it be a shame to wait until Jair was back? To be quite honest, Miriam was a bit scared of Jair's return. By now he must have noticed that the shell was missing from his pocket. And what explanation could she give? But if she could hand him ten piastres, that would be different. Then everything would be forgotten and forgiven. . . .

So she and Raffi hurried out to the boys, who were waiting impatiently.

5 *Hassan and his 'Treasures'*

On the steps of the big hotel there were several tall parasols. And right in the middle, a few yards from the entrance, sat Hassan the Turk, under his dirty grey little sunshade. He sold "treasures from the bottom of the sea".

The "treasures" lay on a rough wooden table, which was covered with a blue cloth, as blue as the sea itself. There were bottles arranged among the corals, filled with sea-almonds, sea-urchins and seaweeds. Then there were smooth, white star-fishes, sea-horses and the famous round sea-snails, each with a tiny, delicately drawn flower on its softly-striped back. Along the edges of the table stood Hassan's greatest pride: rows of small bottles,

filled with the multi-hued stone dust from the cliffs along the seashore.

Hassan filled these bottles himself and he was a real master of this art. With ten different kinds of dust he would conjure up the most wonderful patterns in the bottles: flowers and birds, the star of David, mountains and valleys. There were even bottles with a map of Israel! Yes, really, Hassan was an artist! The tools for his craft, boxes and bags with sand and stone dust, spouts, funnels and rubber tubes, were kept under the table.

There was always a great deal of coming and going of admiring buyers and onlookers at Hassan's table. The inhabitants of Tamaria could not imagine the town without him. Hassan and his "treasures from the bottom of the sea" were part of Tamaria. And as surely as the sun rose every morning, so also did Hassan sit down again in his usual place in front of the big hotel. He sat behind the table, with his left leg, the wooden one, propped up on a stool. He had a big black moustache, and above it his large nose stuck out like a carrot.

There was one inhabitant of Tamaria who was always sorry to see Hassan arrive. That was Mr. Rimon, the young proprietor of the big hotel. It made his blood boil to think of all that rubbish of Hassan's. Yes, that's what he called it. Mr. Rimon thought that the dirty grey sunshade and the pots and jars completely spoiled the beautiful entrance to his hotel. He had tried all sorts of things to get rid of Hassan. He had promised him a new sunshade – an orange one with green and blue stripes – if only he would move his stand to the corner of the street, please. Preferably even farther away. He had promised him a new table and ten pounds into the bargain.

But Hassan refused. "I wouldn't leave this spot for a



hundred pounds," he said. "After all, I've a right to it. And in any case, I don't need a new parasol. This one is good enough for an old Turk like me."

Everybody in Tamaria knew that Hassan was within his rights. It was there, exactly on the spot where Hassan's rough wooden table now stood that he had fallen from the scaffold, just as he was painting the H of the word HOTEL on the front of the newly finished building. And there, below the scaffold, had stood the motor-bike of young Mr. Rimón, the hotel owner's spoilt son.

"If that motor-bike hadn't been there," said Hassan, who was fond of telling everyone about his accident, whether they wanted to listen or not, "if that motor-bike hadn't been there, I would now be walking on two legs, instead of hopping about on one! Because of that motor-bike my left leg came down so awkwardly that there wasn't much left of the bone except splinters. He" – Hassan would go on, indignantly pointing in the direction of the hotel – "he didn't care much, but his father had a good heart. He promised me free meals in the hotel for as long as I lived and he even gave me a wooden leg," tapping on his left leg. "Yes, yes, good old Mr. Rimón, he had a heart. He even wanted to make me the hall porter, but I prefer to stand on my own legs."

At this point in his story, Hassan would burst out into roars of laughter, and would continue: "Let him, I mean young Mr. Rimón, let him send the President after me if he likes! He won't get rid of me!"

Every morning Mr. Rimón stood behind the curtain of the window on the first-floor landing, stifling his anger when Hassan came riding along. Hassan always sat on his old donkey and behind him shuffled Chasila, his wife. On

her head she carried a large mat with the merchandise in sacks and boxes. Hassan's tools were in two wooden boxes, hanging on either side of the saddle. When they arrived at the hotel, Hassan and Chasila began to unload, and then they busily put the stall in order. Invariably, it wasn't very long before Hassan left his wife to finish the work. He would hobble off to the kitchen, where his friend the cook treated him to a sumptuous breakfast.

After a good half-hour Hassan would reappear, satisfied and contented. In his hands he would carry bread and fruit; that was for his wife. Chasila sat in the neatly arranged stall, knitting while she waited. As soon as Hassan was back, she would hurry home with the food.

That was how it went every morning. So it was not surprising that, upstairs behind the curtain, Mr. Rimón was biting his lips with rage.

When Miriam and the boys arrived at Hassan's stall, there was already quite a crowd. Chaim nudged Raffi and said, admiringly, "Look over there! What a smashing bus!"

A large, blue and yellow bus, with the sign "American Touringcar" painted on the side, stood in the parking place by the hotel. A stream of people was emerging from the bus. The boys, pleased, looked at each other. They couldn't have hit a better moment. The tourists, who were of course staying in the hotel, would have to pass Hassan's stall first. His stand looked so tempting this morning, that it would probably be sold out soon. Then Hassan would need more stuff for the factory workers who were coming later on. What luck that they had come just at this time!

Mr. Rimón stood in front of the hotel, bowing in

welcome to all the tourists. In between bows, he cast sour glances at Hassan, who was once again behaving as if it were *he* who owned the hotel.

"This way, this way, sir. Wonderful shells, sir. Yes indeed, sir, found them myself." He spoke in English and in Hebrew, now and then interlarded with Turkish words. "Rare corals from the Red Sea. Yes, sir, from the Red Sea!" So Hassan displayed to the onlookers the rarities he had to offer. His sharp eyes were darting everywhere. For the gentleman with the red beard, over there, this large bottle with the map. And what are those girls looking at? Wait a moment, the shell necklaces for them. That old lady there? "Ah, madam, this red coral here. The real genuine article!" Hassan couldn't cope with the rush. He beckoned to the boys, who were standing around, and Chaim and Etan rushed forward to help him. He only allowed this when he was very, very busy.

"Wrap these up quickly, boys," he grunted from under his moustaches. "Here's some paper. Count the money and look sharp. Those Americans only know dollars. I see you've brought me some new stuff. That's fine, that's fine, good boys!"

Raffi snorted with laughter. Hassan was so funny, and the Americans couldn't get enough of him and his wares. They went on buying and Hassan went on encouraging them to buy. It would be a good while before he would have finished with those people, thought Raffi. He crossed the street and went to have a look at the beautiful bus. The driver was busy polishing the windows. As he worked he glanced at Raffi, who was holding an open basket in his hand.

"Have you come to sell me some sand and stones, or has that old scoundrel the monopoly in this place?" he

asked jeeringly, making a movement with his head in the direction of Hassan's stall.

"Hassan isn't a scoundrel!" answered Raffi indignantly. Who did those drivers from the north think they were? Sand and stones indeed! They didn't appreciate beautiful things.

But wait a moment! What was that he had just said? Hadn't that driver asked him whether he was selling anything? Not such a bad idea. He must think about that. Raffi sat down on one of the posts at the edge of the car park. Thoughtfully he looked at Hassan's stall. Miriam and the others were now standing by the table where the crowd had thinned out a little. To sell one's own stuff, thought Raffi, yes, why not? How often they had noticed that the things which Hassan had bought from them for a song, were later sold for twenty-five piastres or even for half a pound. It was true, Hassan had to make a living out of it, whereas they only did it for fun, as a game. And when it brought in a bit of pocket-money, they were more than satisfied. And yet . . .

All the tourists had left Hassan's stall now. And so he would now have time for the boys. His loud voice boomed across the square.

"Right, let's have a look. What have you got? And you? What use is that to me? Do you call that a coral? It looks like a pebble to me!" Inspecting and estimating, Hassan was busily occupied. Every now and again his voice would rasp out: "What? For that snail you're asking five piastres? Five! I wouldn't give my own flesh and blood more than half a piastre for it, I can tell you, as true as my name is Hassan!"

Resolutely Raffi slid down from the post on which he sat. It was true what the driver had said. Hassan was an

old scoundrel and they . . . they were stupid idiots. He was going to try on his own. Only, he had to be careful that Hassan wouldn't get wind of it. He wasn't quite sure how to go about it. All coaches and taxis always stopped in front of the hotel and to get to the restaurant and the bar one had to go past Hassan's stall. Oh yes, Hassan knew very well why he wasn't going to leave that spot.

The tall windows of the hotel bar looked out on to the terrace in the corner of the square. Slowly Raffi walked past Hassan's stand. Luckily no one paid any attention to him. That was hardly surprising, for everyone's eyes were on Hassan, who was making even more of a hullabaloo than before. Miriam was standing there too, Raffi noticed. She was keeping a bit to the side; it wouldn't be her turn for a long time yet. Quickly, Raffi rounded the corner and slipped into a side street. At the bottom of the street he turned and walked back again. But he went very slowly this time, hoping to meet strangers. He intended to offer them his wares.

Two girls were coming his way. Americans, Raffi guessed, because they were wearing large sunglasses with thick American rims. Quickly he walked up to them, holding in front of him the basket in which his collection of shells and a large brown-white spotted coral were displayed.

But all of a sudden he felt so shy that he couldn't utter a word. The two girls took no notice of him at all; they didn't even see him and walked on, talking busily. They were swinging their large checked bags to and fro.

I bet those bags are full of Hassan's stuff, Raffi thought enviously. No, it was no good like this. He would have to have more courage. What was Hassan's way of doing it?

With his basket on top of his head, he began to hop up

and down as if he were Hassan with his wooden leg, and he imitated Hassan's hoarse voice: "This way, mister! Rare objects. You find them only in the Red Sea. Real corals, genuine corals!"

A loud burst of laughter behind him made him stop suddenly. A man, also with enormous glasses, and a boy of his own age, stood behind him, rocking with laughter. Raffi felt so ashamed that he could have died. He wanted nothing better than to run away.

Then the boy said slowly and clearly, "Come here." He did not say any more, but he turned to his father and spoke fast and excitedly in a language which Raffi had never heard before. The father nodded his approval. Raffi was standing right in front of them now. The boy took several shells out of the basket and examined them closely. Some of them he put back, others he gave to his father.

The boy had finished; he had carefully selected the large, snow-white sea snail with its patterned back, two fossilized shells, which looked just like toadstools turned upside-down, with their thin gills on the top, and a few lovely spotted snail shells. Hassan usually got such snail shells for nothing when he bought things from the boys.

"How much?" the boy asked Raffi, proud of his Hebrew.

Raffi hesitated. He really didn't know how much to ask for. Hassan always fixed the price of everything. The boys never did, and so Raffi wasn't quite sure what he could ask. The boy's father noticed Raffi's hesitation, took out his wallet and pulled out a pound note. He pressed the note into Raffi's hand and said something to him which Raffi couldn't understand. Then he glanced at his watch, muttered a few words to his son and pulled the boy away

quickly. The boy called *shalom* to Raffi, who stood in blank bewilderment, looking at the pound note which he held in his hand. A pound! Raffi was struck dumb. Only when the boy and his father had moved away to the hotel terrace, did he realize that they had gone.

"Would you believe it!" shouted Raffi loudly, and he began to dance with joy like a dervish. He wondered where the boy came from. They hadn't been talking in English, Raffi knew, because he would have recognized that. The boy must have learned a few words of Hebrew, and he probably had a collection of shells at home, too. What a pity, Raffi thought, that he hadn't had anything more exciting in his basket. But suddenly he thought of Miriam's shell. It would be an awful pity if Hassan laid his hands on it and paid next to nothing for it. Was it in his bony clutches yet? Raffi broke into a run, and rushed around the corner, straight to Hassan's stall. All the boys, as well as Miriam, were still standing around. And indeed, Hassan was just holding Miriam's shell close to his head.

"I can't hear a thing," Raffi heard him groan. "No, nothing. Oh well, okay little girl, I'll give you three piastres for it."

"Five, Hassan!" the boys shouted in chorus. "You won't get it for less than five! Don't give it to him, Miriam!"

Miriam, who, during the long wait, had begun to suffer more and more from a bad conscience, hardly knew herself what she wanted to do. Should she let Hassan have the shell for three piastres or had she better take it home and try to smuggle it back into Jair's pocket, hoping that he still hadn't missed it?

But here came Raffi, rushing up to her like a whirlwind.

"Don't sell it, Miriam," he shouted, at the same time

snatching the shell out of Hassan's hands, who was not at all prepared for this.

"What's the matter with you?" asked Hassan in surprise. "Where have you been all this time? Haven't you got anything for me today?" Raffi almost called out triumphantly, "I've sold everything!" Fortunately he stopped himself just in time. Who knows, Hassan might become terribly angry. Of course he would! He was capable of going after him with his stick. He always told the boys that he was a true Turkish fighter. No, decided Raffi, it was none of Hassan's business.

"I haven't anything today," he answered curtly, hoping that his friends wouldn't show their surprise and betray him.

"Come along, Miriam," he said, "I think Jair wants to sell his shell himself." And hastily he moved away from Hassan's stall. Miriam, relieved that the responsibility had been taken away from her, followed Raffi.

But at that moment Hassan, who wasn't used to any interference with his purchases, began to shout. "Hey there! Give me back that shell! I've bought it! Come back, you two! Okay then, I'll give you five piastres for it!"

But Raffi pretended not to hear a thing. He hurried into the side-street and walked on to the terrace of the hotel, closely followed by Miriam.

Where could his two customers have gone? Raffi looked around. They had gone to the terrace, he was sure of that. Raffi looked and looked, but they were not among the guests sitting at the tables, so they must have gone into the hotel through one of the french windows. They were open, temptingly, and through the red checked net curtains Raffi saw that there were no guests in the bar. There

was Joseef, the waiter, coming out, skilfully picking his way between the tables with a full tray.

"Miriam," whispered Raffi, "would you dare go inside with me? I know somebody who would like to buy your shell. I wasn't serious when I said that about Jair just now."

"But I thought . . . I wanted . . ." Miriam didn't get any further. Raffi gave her no time to finish. Joseef was standing with his back towards them. This was the moment. Raffi grabbed Miriam by the arm and pulled her along. They sneaked through the curtains and there they were in the empty bar.

It was cool and quiet inside. The silver jugs on the counter shone. But Raffi allowed himself no time to look around. He walked into the hall on tiptoe and quickly hid himself behind the broad staircase leading to the first floor.

What now? Should he go upstairs and simply knock on the doors? Suppose he met Mr. Rimon? What should he say then? That he wanted to sell his shells? Yes, why not? He wasn't doing any harm. A pity; he should have brought some newspapers with him; newspaper boys always easily managed to get in everywhere.

Without bothering about Miriam any more, Raffi ran up the stairs. They were covered with a thick carpet, so that he could not hear his own footsteps. He thought the silence was quite eerie, but he walked on courageously. Now that he had come as far as this, he wasn't going to give up.

He turned into a side passage and knocked at a door, and listened . . . no answer. Another door . . . a third . . . no answer. What was the matter with this ghost hotel? The place seemed completely deserted.

Then a door opened somewhere on the next floor. Raffi heard voices and the banging of doors. People were coming down the stairs. Raffi stayed in the narrow passage and pressed himself as flat as possible against the wall. Wait, he would have just one look. Hurrah, what a piece of luck! The boy who had bought the shells and his father were coming down the stairs; each with a large sack slung over his shoulder. Raffi was pleased and jumped forward, then he stopped dead with a sudden start. Just behind them followed Mr. Rimón, the hotel owner. He looked sternly at Raffi, his eyebrows raised.

"What's this?" he asked grimly. "What are you doing here?" Raffi began to stammer something. But the boy recognized him too and began to talk to him in a foreign language. He didn't realize that Raffi couldn't understand a word of it. Raffi, cunningly, didn't lose any time. He held out his hand and showed the boy the beautiful shell. Then he made it tinkle by his ear and said in English, "Beautiful, beautiful."

Eagerly the boy took the shell from Raffi. Unfortunately Mr. Rimón began to interfere at this point. "Will you get out of here at once, you cheeky little devil! Who let you in here? Joseef perhaps?"

"No, I, I . . ." stammered Raffi, "I came in by myself." Then he pointed to the boy. "He wants to buy shells."

"What!" said Mr. Rimón angrily, "You're coming to peddle shells in my hotel? Do you think this is a marketplace? As if it weren't enough that that . . ." Mr. Rimón stopped suddenly and turned as red as a turkey. "Ah," he went on after a while, "of course, Hassan sent you! Well, my boy, you are going to stay here till I hand you over to the police."

"No, sir, please don't," begged Raffi. "Hassan doesn't

know anything about it, honestly. They were my own shells. He . . .” and Raffi pointed to the boy again, “he bought them all from me. And I thought he might like this beautiful one of Miriam’s . . . of Jair’s . . .”

“Your own shells?” asked Mr. Rimón, suddenly becoming much more friendly.

But the boy’s father – apparently an impatient man – began to walk on. He turned briefly to the hotel proprietor, who nodded. “You’d better tell them quickly what you want for it,” Mr. Rimón said to Raffi. “They’ve got to go now.”

The impatient father didn’t wait for Raffi’s reply, but pressed some coins into his hand, and walked hurriedly downstairs. He dragged his son with him, but the boy had eyes only for Jair’s beautiful shell. Mr. Rimón followed them closely.

There were thirty piastres in Raffi’s hand. He stared at the coins – thirty piastres! One pound thirty he had earned today! One pound for himself and thirty piastres for Jair! He could have shouted out with joy. If it were going to go on like this the whole summer, then . . .

Raffi jumped down the stairs three steps at a time and walked into the bar as if he belonged there. He looked out for Miriam, but she wasn’t there any more, and he went out through the open doors on to the terrace.

Where had Miriam gone? Raffi wondered. She wasn’t on the terrace. Surely she wouldn’t have gone back to Hassan’s stall and given the game away? Raffi ran right across the terrace to the corner of the street.

In front of the hotel there was a large, light green car, which was just about to move off. Mr. Rimón bowed and waved. All at once, Raffi saw that his customers of a moment ago were driving away in it. “*Shalom*, good-bye,

shalom!" he shouted, raising his hand. The boy recognized him, and waved back.

Mr. Rimón remained standing in the hotel entrance and beckoned to Raffi. "Well, you must have made a nice big profit, I should think," he said to Raffi. "What is Hassan going to say about that?"

"Hassan needn't know anything about it," answered Raffi, thinking to himself what a crazy chap Mr. Rimón was, really. Then he asked, "Do you know that boy's name and where he comes from, sir?"

"Yes, certainly," answered Mr. Rimón good-naturedly. "He's called Michel and they come from Rome. That gentleman just said to me that his son would like to see some shell-diving one day."

"Oh, that's fine, he can come with us." Raffi was full of eagerness at once. "When would he like to come?" he asked.

"You'll hear about that later. They have gone camping and fishing for a few days. You'd better come to ask from time to time," answered Mr. Rimón. "Yes, thank you, sir," said Raffi happily, and was about to go away. But Mr. Rimón stopped him and asked, "I suppose you would like to come here more often to sell your shells?"

Raffi couldn't believe his ears. What? Mr. Rimón agreeing that he could hawk shells in his magnificent hotel?

"You can sell your shells on the terrace at the side," added Mr. Rimón. "Almost all the people who visit the town come to have something to drink there. You could earn quite a bit of money. Much more than . . . er . . . in front of the hotel. By the way, what's your name?"

"Raffi Tamir, sir, from Pioneers' Street," said Raffi politely. "And, sir, may I please bring my friend too?"

"We'll see about that later. Now you'd better be off. I

can't stand here wasting the whole morning," and Mr. Rimon turned around and stalked into the hotel.

Miriam was indeed standing by Hassan's stall. She and all the boys were watching Raffi and Mr. Rimon in suspense. Hassan sat staring in front of him with a grim face. Miriam had obviously talked. When she saw that Mr. Rimon had gone inside, she came running along at a trot. Raffi's face beamed, and he chuckled to himself. What had she been thinking? That he was going to be arrested.

"Tell me quickly," panted Miriam. "I heard Mr. Rimon talking so loudly that I didn't dare stay in the hotel. And where's my shell?"

"Here," said Raffi, laughing, and showed her the coins in his hand. Miriam's eyes became big and round. "Did you . . . did you . . . get all that for it? Is that money for us, Raffi?"

"For Jair, you mean," Raffi corrected her. "Yes, what do you think of that? I was terribly lucky. But come on, let's go and find Jair and I'll tell you all about it."

"Okay!" shouted Miriam. "What will Jair say!"

Yes indeed, what would Jair say!

6 *Uuno the Fisherman*

A few hours after Miriam, in fear of her father, had jumped quickly back into bed and had fallen fast asleep, Jair was awakened by his mother. In a whisper she told him that Father had come home in the middle of the night and that all the preparations for their bungalow had been made.

“Soon that piece of beach will be ours, boy,” said Mother proudly, “and no one will have to keep watch any longer. But until then you’ll have to be on guard on the beach. So it will be for the last time, Jair, because Father is coming with the surveyor today.”

Jair liked the idea of going to the beach once more on his own. First of all, he wanted to try to find a really beautiful shell for Miriam. She didn’t deserve it, actually,

but all right, he'd forgive her. Later on, Mazal would surely be there. He wanted to teach her to swim. He had found an old swimsuit of Miriam's in the cupboard and, without telling her anything about it, had put it into the breakfast basket. And of course, they would also have to hide the ring in the sea. He had taken a piece of wire from Father's nail box, to fasten the ring to the coral. He was looking forward to his morning on the beach. It promised to be exciting. With this thought, he jumped out of bed and was hardly patient enough to listen any more to Mother. Then quickly he got dressed, while Mother was preparing some bread and butter and a mug of hot chocolate. Jair's mother thought hot chocolate was better than ice-cold milk, so early in the morning.

When Jair had managed to get one slice of bread down, and had of course burned his tongue with the hot chocolate, and, on top of all this, had swallowed the wrong way, he thought he'd had enough. He would eat again later on, he said, and took the breakfast basket himself this time.

With the basket in one hand and his harpoon in the other, he started off. His mother, with a smile, watched him go. He really was a good boy, that Jair of hers. Without a grumble he sacrificed his precious free mornings, which otherwise would have been spent with his friends.

Jair walked on briskly, thinking that yesterday, with Father, he had set off earlier. He hoped he wouldn't meet anybody on the way. Who knows, Chasila might already have started her everlasting washing, or else Grandma Jichje. Oh no, that wasn't possible. She had gone away on a journey, yesterday, before Mazal had come to the beach. Automatically, his hand felt for the shell in his trousers pocket. But suddenly, as if he were caught red handed, he stood still. Hassan's donkey stood by the side of his house,

tied up, and next to the donkey was Jichje, pottering about with a large sack on his back. Jair was about to turn and go back, but it was too late. Jichje had seen him.

"Well, well, Jair Harar," he called, "you're up and about early today. What are you up to that can't bear to see the daylight?" and he laughed.

"It's been daylight for a long time," answered Jair, laughing a little wryly. "But what about you, Jichje? You're up early yourself," he went on, looking questioningly at Jichje. He must find out whether Jichje had heard anything yet. "The boy is right," said Jichje in his singsong voice. "But you see, it's because of the women," and with a sigh he let the sack slide down to the ground.

Jair calmly put his basket on the ground as if he had all the time in the world. "Are you waiting for Hassan?" he asked casually.

"No, no," answered Jichje croakingly, and he repeated, "It's all because of the women, didn't I tell you?" He shook his head so fiercely that his beard and the curly locks on his temples bobbed up and down. And then he began to sing:

*"The women, the women, they were born with two tongues.
The women, the women, are the luck and the fate of this poor
man.
Whether they are pretty, like Sarai, Abram's wife, Or ugly
like Chasila,
With the tongue they are quick,
But they are always late."*

From Hassan's house came laughter, and almost at the same time a voice called, "Quiet out there!" And out came

Chasila, shuffling out of the house in her down-at-heel slippers. Jichje was certainly right about her. Chasila was definitely not beautiful, with her long crooked nose, big black circles under half-shut eyes, and greasy, dark reddish hair. She looked like a real witch, Chasila, but when you looked at her carefully, you saw that she was a kind witch.

"Quiet, Jichje," she called out huskily. "Does everyone have to wake up because you've turned your old mother out into the street and I've got to do her laundry now?"

"I told you Mazal could do the washing, didn't I?" retorted Jichje.

"Shame on you, Jichje! We're not in the Yemen, you know, where the girls and the women are the men's slaves. Oh, yes," she nodded, "I heard your little song all right just now! To let Mazal do that big load of washing – that skinny little thing, poor child. She's got a whole lifetime to do the washing. No, I think it really would be better, after all, if you didn't wait any longer to . . ." She stopped all of a sudden and turned to Jair, as if she had only just noticed him.

"And why are you here so early? Do you want Shaoul? He's still asleep, just like his father!"

"I'm going to dive for shells," replied Jair. "The water is much clearer early in the morning." What a stupid ass he was. Why hadn't he moved on, before Chasila had come outside? But now at least he knew that Jichje's sack held only dirty washing, and no nameplate.

Chasila shook her head. "Are you going off on your own?" she asked, surprised.

"None of the others wanted to get up so early," lied Jair. "But I'm going now. *Shalom*."

"The best of luck," croaked Jichje and Chasila called

after him, "I'll send Shaoul after you. That'll be very healthy for that lazybones!"

Jair pretended not to hear and walked quickly on. Where was she going to send Shaoul? he thought. To the beach by the swimming-pool? In that case fat old Shaoul would have to search for a long time. But, Jair laughed to himself, Shaoul didn't allow himself to be ordered around so easily. He preferred to bake in the sun rather than go diving for shells. And how right he was, too. His father paid him hardly anything for the things he brought home. Unjust, thought Jair.

Jair was out of breath when he arrived at the black rock. He hadn't even given himself time to rest, and in his hurry, hadn't noticed the heat. But now he was looking forward to having a long rest by the pole. And then he must have a look at the shell. He wondered whether the white of egg had become unstuck or not. Actually, it didn't matter any more. He would have to break the shell open in any case, in order to take the ring out of it. Should he try to hide the ring inside the shell among the corals? But could he fasten the shell? And finally, wouldn't it be a pity to sacrifice that beautiful shell?

While his thoughts were spinning around in this way, Jair had walked on to the beach without being aware of it. All of a sudden he noticed that the pole wasn't there any longer. For a moment he stood still, bewildered and crushed. But no matter how he searched, it was really true. The pole and the nameplate with JOSEEF HARAR had gone, and his wall too, had disappeared. There was only a big black tent on the sand.

With thumping heart Jair walked a little way in the direction of the tent, and saw that what he had taken for a

tent was only a large piece of sail-cloth. Someone had pulled it over the wall and had used the post as a tent pole. At the sides the sail-cloth had been fastened down with mounds of sand. Then he saw, a bit farther on, a fishing boat which had been pulled up on to the beach. But . . . there was not a soul in sight.

Jair stood still and reflected. Could it be a fisherman who had spent the night here? Or someone from the town? He must find out!

"Hello, who is there?" he called out loudly. There was silence for a moment. Then he heard a loud yawn, and someone sniffing and clearing his throat. It was just as if a giant were waking up. At last the sail-cloth was thrown open with such force that the sand flew all over the place. A laughing face beamed at Jair, a sunburned face with a mouth full of glittering gold teeth.

"Hello boy," said a familiar voice.

"Uuno!" Jair gave a sigh of relief. "It's you. Thank goodness for that."

Yes, it was Uuno, the Italian fisherman. Eight years ago he had come from Tripolis to Tamaria, and since that time he had never left Tamaria and the sea for a single day. He was an odd chap, Uuno. Quite different from other people. You could tell, just by looking at his house. Uuno didn't have an ordinary house, but lived in a hut – a hut made of mats, which he had built himself, like the ones in which negroes live in Africa. It stood close by the sea, right on the beach, and not far from the port.

But Uuno was not just an ordinary fisherman. Oh no! In the floor of his boat he had fixed a glass sheet. This enabled him to look down while he was sailing, and to study the world under water. And Uuno enjoyed doing that. He also caught fish for the Maritime Museum. For

this he had special nets and traps and he would put on an oxygen mask. Uuno was a fisherman like no other. There was an aura of mystery about him and his hut.

All the boys of Tamaria would have loved to go sailing with Uuno, but their parents wouldn't hear of it. Uuno had no sense of time. For him the day began when he had slept enough and became hungry, and the night when he was tired and had no more to do. If he felt like it he would go home at night, but he might very well stay out at sea for days on end. Uuno was tied to nothing.

Jair was not afraid of Uuno. He spoke Hebrew, but in his own way. Letters he couldn't read at all. And even if he had been able to read them, he wouldn't have cared in the least that Joseef Harar had put up on the beach a post with his name on it. Uuno didn't need any posts with nameplates. The whole sea belonged to him.

"Me been ill yesterday," Uuno said to Jair, without bothering to ask him where he had suddenly appeared from.

"Me pain in belly. Here and here," and he pointed to his head and shoulders. "But now no more ill," he jabbered on gaily. "I go find fish for breakfast," drumming cheerfully on his stomach. "You come with me, boy?"

Jair nodded ardently. He could have shouted and danced with joy because he had found no one but Uuno here. He put his basket by the wall, threw off his shirt and trousers and ran after Uuno, who was walking in the direction of his boat, his shoulders hunched up, and with big, staggering strides. Seen from the back Jair thought he looked just like a huge monkey, with his long, stooping back and his hairy, swaying arms – a circus monkey who was wearing nothing but a pair of very short, worn trunks, and a red scarf tied around his neck.

Uuno rummaged around in his boat. Under the glaring blue painted helm, which sat like a butterfly on the otherwise paintless boat, was a storage place. This was Uuno's provision room. A primus stove appeared, a jug, a bottle of oil and a tin full of deliciously fragrant coffee. When Jair saw all this lying in the boat, he ran back to the wall to fetch his basket. He must show Uuno what an ordinary breakfast was like, Jair thought. He would have to taste it and see how nice it was.

But Uuno, seeing milk and tomatoes in the basket, laughed at him and said, "Pooh, good for little children! Come along, boy! Let's catch some fish." He put on his belt, which was fitted with hooks on which to spear the captured fish, and picked up his fishing gear.

Uuno's harpoon looked like a machine-gun. It had three triggers which could shoot off three arrows at different distances, and almost at the same moment.

Jair's own harpoon looked a mere toy compared with this. His was painted a childish bright red, and it had only one arrow. But, Jair consoled himself, the arrow was nice and sharp, and he had caught quite a few fishes with it. He could manage quite well with it until Father fulfilled his promise to buy him a new one.

Uuno waded through the water at great speed, in spite of the many stones; Jair followed him, along the same path, putting on a brave face as though he did not feel the sharp edges and points.

Soon they reached the corals about which Jair had told Mazal yesterday. It was essential to float lightly across them without touching them, but usually one didn't get away without some scratches.

But Uuno didn't seem to worry. Without hesitation and

without any noticeable caution he glided through the water, like a merman in a fairy tale.

As soon as they had crossed the corals, the water suddenly became much paler. This was because of the reflection from the bottom of the sea, which consisted here of clean white sand. Uuno turned and darted back among the corals, where shoals of black and black-and-white fishes were swimming. They were startled at having their peace disturbed and began to whirl around at dizzy speed. But this was just what Uuno wanted. He sent his arrows whizzing and in no time he had captured two black fishes. Jair did not have such rapid success. He was still busy pulling back his arrow after the first shot, when he saw Uuno climbing up on to a rock in a coral reef. Quickly Jair swam towards him. He wanted to have a good look at how Uuno handled his gun. But what was Uuno doing now? Had Jair seen clearly? Uuno had stood up straight and thrown, in a long curved arc, the two fishes back into the water.

"Uuno, what are you doing?" shouted Jair.

Uuno paid no attention to him. He dived into the water again and now the chase began in earnest. Unfortunately, Jair couldn't see much of it, because Uuno dashed to and fro amongst the corals with such speed, that clouds of foam leaped up into the air. It was just as if a blowing whale were tearing through the water.

After only a few minutes Uuno called, "Come on, boy, we have enough now. I go back." And he swam back to the beach.

Regretfully Jair pulled his arrow in and cautiously swam back. He hadn't caught anything yet. Uuno was already busy cleaning the fishes. He stripped off their hard scales incredibly fast.

“Why did you throw the first catch back into the sea?”
Jair asked.

Uuno put his hand on his heart and said solemnly, “It must be done so. All Italian fishermen in Tripolis give first catch back to the sea. Brings luck!” And he indicated to Jair that he should light the primus stove and put on it the blackened pan filled with oil.

“Fisherman who does not throw back into the sea, stingy. Sea angry, gives one, two fishes and brings bad luck to the boat. I know such mean fishermen. Not rich like we Italian fishermen.”

“Rich?” laughed Jair. Uuno rich, Jair couldn’t imagine that – Uuno, who lived in such a poor little hut and who ate hardly anything except the fish which he himself caught. Uuno laughed too, good-naturedly. His teeth glittered. “You laugh, hey, but yet I rich. Fisherman who catches much is rich,” he explained. “And today the sea devil is done for,” he added earnestly. “Sits on the bottom of the sea and waits for me.”

As he spoke, his hands were never still for a moment. First he salted the cleaned pieces of fish and then he put pepper on them, so much that they looked black with it. Then he let them slide gently into the pan of oil which was sizzling on the primus stove.

“Are you going to catch a sea devil?” Jair shouted excitedly.

“The sea devil is for museum,” Uuno said. “Every week Director of museum comes and says, ‘Uuno, bring new sea devil. The old one ill and will die soon.’ I sit in my boat, look and look and see sea devil. He lies like a stone on the bottom, so you cannot recognize him. But Uuno knows him. Today I go down for him.”

Jair had listened attentively and understood what Uuno

meant. He had often seen the sea devil in the museum looking just like a lump of pinkish grey stone. There was always a crowd of children watching him, because they wanted to see how the sea devil gobbled up the fishes. And now Uuno was going to catch one. Jair would give anything to be able to sail out with him today. He envied Uuno.

All day long Uuno would be chasing after the most beautiful fish or lie asleep in his boat if he felt like it. What a life that was! And then look at poor Jair! He had to sit on the beach like a good little boy, wasting his free time.

And Jair began to pity himself more and more. Even the big chunks of steaming fish couldn't console him, although he was having a wonderful meal.

Jair was still absorbed in his self-pity, when Uuno suddenly became restless. He hurriedly swallowed his bread and fish and started to collect all his belongings together and pack them away in the boat.

"The sea devil is waiting for me," he said good-naturedly, wiping his mouth with his broad arm. "Well, are you coming, boy?" and he was already tugging at his boat.

"Just for a short while," decided Jair. He had returned to reality and suddenly remembered Father's orders.

He helped Uuno to pull the boat across the beach and together they dragged it over the stones into the water. Then they jumped in. Uuno was in a good mood and beckoned to Jair to sit at the helm. Let the boy enjoy himself, he thought. But Jair shook his head.

"I'll come with you another time, Uuno!" he called out. "*Shalom!*"

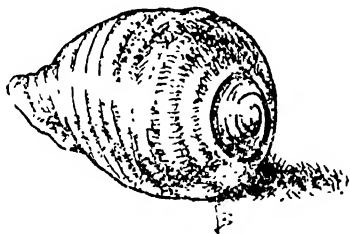
Uuno's monkey hands gesticulated, as much as to say

that he was sorry that Jair was leaving him, and then they waved a gay *shalom*.

Jair watched the boat until it had disappeared around the corner. Then he turned and swam back.

Firmly, and yet smoothly, as he had seen Uuno do, Jair moved through the water in the direction of the beach. He went on, floating rather than swimming, until he hit the stones. Then he opened his eyes wide. There was the beach, and the wall. Lithely, he jumped straight up and shook himself like a wet dog.

And only then did he see Mazal. She stood motionless on the beach. Oh, good heavens, he had completely forgotten about her.



Jair really needn't have been so cautious on his way to the beach, for Jichje – after a wakeful night – was tired. He wanted to give the washing to Chasila as quickly as possible and then go home to sleep. Besides, he had enough worries of his own.

Grandma Cheftziba's departure had caused difficulties which Jichje had not foreseen. It was true, he had sent her away because he wanted to bring a young bride into the house. He had been looking for a long time for an energetic woman with whom he might perhaps one day realize his dream of starting a farm near Tamaria. She would have to be energetic, if she were prepared to be a farmer's wife in this dry land. Not a blade of grass would grow there, if you didn't look after it as if it were your most precious possession.

But now Jichje had found such a woman. Channa Shimoni was her name. Her family came from the Yemen, where in former days they had had a farm, just like Jichje.

Jichje and Mr. Shimoni had already discussed the matter and had even drunk a bottle of *arak* to it. It had been agreed to celebrate the engagement soon, in Jichje's house. Then he would solemnly give his new bride the wedding ring which he had bought, to set the seal on the engagement. Afterwards he would keep the ring for Channa, and put it on her finger on the day of the wedding. This seemed to Jichje the right way to reconcile the old customs as he had known them in the Yemen, and the new, of the land of Israel.

Jichje did not doubt in the least that the young bride would be willing to look after his three children. But he wasn't at all sure that she would also consider it her duty to do all the washing which Grandma Cheftziba used to do every week for her various customers. Times were not what they used to be. And the young women were no longer as he had known them in the Yemen, either. No, they have changed, thought Jichje. They are no longer like my first wife, Shoshanna.

He noticed this clearly when he looked at Mazal, his own daughter. She was twelve years old, a grown-up person according to the law. But she still behaved just like a baby. All day long she walked around with tears in her eyes. Not a word came out of her. She had not done the washing and had been unwilling to prepare supper for her brothers. Lord in Heaven, thought Jichje, will it have to come to the point when I will have to beat my own daughter?

And then last night! How strangely she had behaved! He wanted to tell her about his plan to bring a new

mother into the house. A sweet young woman, a bit on the modern side, it was true, but that would probably change once she was married. Mr. Shimoni had assured him of this.

"Mazal," Jichje had said, "you must tidy up the house and put up some decorations, because we . . ."

But Mazal had suddenly walked away. She hadn't even allowed him to finish what he was saying. What do you do with a child like that? wondered Jichje. He hoped that his new wife would be able to get some sense into her.

Jichje had been left with the dirty washing. It was lying all over the veranda. What kind of impression would this make on the Shimoni family? Not to mention the customers, who were waiting for their clean laundry. Mazal did not realize that Grandma Cheftziba had grown too old to do so much work, but she had made it quite clear that she herself was too young.

At his wits' end Jichje had at last gone to Chasila, who promised to do the washing for them. "There isn't a better friend than you anywhere," Jichje swore with a thousand proverbs and blessings. "Indeed, you will receive your reward, Chasila."

So when Jichje had been relieved of this worry, he went home cheerfully. Now he must see what to do about Mazal. But first he needed some sleep. Rest after work comes before anything else, thought Jichje. The three children were still asleep when their father came home and he lay down comfortably on the bench. But it wasn't long before the boys woke up. The first one woke because the second one tickled him and then, because Grandma wasn't there, together they woke up Mazal. They didn't feel like getting their own meal ready again.

But oh, Mazal was so tired. It seemed as if her eyelids

were weighted. She just let the boys go on making a noise, and even forgot to tell them to be quiet because of Father. Drowsily she lay thinking about yesterday, but it took a long time for the events of that day to return clearly to her mind.

When she had come home from the beach yesterday, without the ring, her father sat in front of the house, reading the paper.

"Where have you been?" he asked, annoyed.

Mazal grew stiff and muttered indistinctly, "Been to take some laundry back for Grandma." Hurriedly she slipped into the house, quickly took the broom from the hook and frenziedly began to sweep.

The jewel box was no longer on the table, Mazal saw. Good, then Father must have put it away without looking in it. Or could he have noticed something all the same? It was a dreadful day. Every time her father spoke to her, Mazal felt her legs tremble and her face burn. She hardly dared to think of what she had done, she was so afraid that Father might read it on her face. Mazal went on working all the time. She put the beds outside to be aired. Then she had to cook a big pot of soup. On the veranda stood a large sack, full of washing. She wanted to finish quickly her tasks in the house, then she could sit outside and grind.

But there was her father, demanding his food. Just at that moment Avram came running in, crying loudly, followed by his brother who was screaming even more loudly. First Avram had thrown a stone at Efraim and then of course Efraim had thrown one back.

But that second stone had hit the mark, so that Avram had got a big cut in his forehead. Father Jichje almost

went out of his mind when he saw it. He ran from the cupboard to the bed and from the bed to the window. How could he stop the blood that dripped down the little chap's nose on to his clothes? For Mazal this was the only moment when she was able to forget her fear. She grabbed a towel from the rail by the tap, made it soaking wet, and pressed it against the wound. That was what Grandma used to do, she knew. Avram went on howling, but after a while he got bored with it.

"Stop it!" he shouted to his sister. "I'll do it myself!" and holding the towel pressed against his forehead with both hands, he dropped down on the bed. His father and his brother watched him, pale and trembling. Blood . . . they couldn't bear to look at it. Without eating anything, they too flopped down on the bed. They were completely knocked out.

Mazal went outside and sat down in the shade by the two rough stones which served as grinding stones. It was her daily task to grind clover grain. Grandma always made lovely sharp-tasting *gilbe* with it, which they liked so much. But Grandma was gone now, Mazal mused. Who would now stir the *gilbe* of the yellow grain which became as white as snow?

It was the hottest hour of the day. No wonder that Mazal, who was sitting in a comfortable position against the wall, with her knees pulled up, dozed off. She was awakened by the whining sing-song of her brothers.

The two boys were having to recite a passage from the Torah to their father. They mumbled unintelligible words, but suddenly their thin voices would linger on a word which they would repeat like a chant, while they swayed the upper part of their bodies to and fro. Father Jichje did not show much patience today. He didn't join in the sing-

ing and swaying as usual, and at every mistake they made he gave them a rap with a spoon, which he used instead of the stick which the rabbi used at school. Here in Tamaría the school was not like the one in the Yemen, where the boys would be taught the Torah in the way Father Jichje was used to. That was why he made them recite a piece at home every day.

Mazal mechanically began to grind. If only she could go on sitting here unnoticed. But unfortunately, her eye fell on the large sack of washing. It had not yet been sorted out, and after that the tub would have to be put on the paraffin stove to boil. Would she have to do that? Her arms and legs went limp at the mere thought of it.

Father sent the boys outside to play, and he himself, Mazal noticed, took down the soft hat which hung on the wall. This was the sign that he was going to Chabib Mizrahi's shack a little farther up the street, to drink a glass of *arak* and to play a game of tric-trac. Father called this 'to forget his worries for a while'. Mazal was glad that he was going out. She felt that at last she could breathe freely again. But how quiet it was in the house. The silence made her feel dejected, it oppressed her, and her thoughts went out to Grandma. Had Grandma arrived yet at Aunt Batsheva's in the Yemenite village? And was she now stirring the *gilbe* for Aunt Batsheva and Uncle Owadia and the seven cousins?

Come on, she had no time to dream. Who were those people shuffling past the window? She saw Shoshanna and Chasila and the other women with whom Grandma Cheftziba usually went to the shop to buy meat and flour.

Mazal hurriedly took the burlap sack which hung by the door and the worn purse in which Jichje always put the housekeeping money, and joined them.

It was late when she returned home. She had waited for more than two hours in the store, where a great many women were doing their shopping. They had made no bones about pushing her aside and being served first. Of course, they had all asked after Grandma Cheftziba. A holiday with her daughter would do Grandma Cheftziba a lot of good. She had looked so tired and old of late. Much too hot in Tamaria for an old lady like her. And now she, Mazal, was doing the housekeeping? Well, well! And the women had shaken their heads compassionately.

Mazal had thought it best to pretend not to see the significant looks that had been exchanged. She was glad when at last she was out of the store.

Jichje and the boys were home when Mazal came trudging up the veranda with her heavy bag. They were sitting at the table, eating *pita* and the cold soup which was left over from lunch-time.

And then came the long-feared moment. Father began to speak in a low voice. She sensed that he was now going to talk about Channa Shimoni. Mazal didn't know what to do. She would have liked to tell her father everything at once. That she had taken the ring away, because she didn't want him to get married again. She wanted Grandma Cheftziba! But the words wouldn't come. Tears choked her, and at last she could no longer keep them back.

Then she fled out of the house into the street. The street lights were already on. The windows were open, voices and radio music filled the air. Hassan sat in front of his house and Chasila was chatting with the grocer's wife. They must not see her. Mazal shuddered again when she thought of the pitying looks in the grocer's store. So she went in the opposite direction. Oh goodness, she couldn't

go that way either, because then she would pass Jair's house. She must avoid meeting him at all cost.

Without making a sound, she stole back to her own house and stood by the window. Inside, the light had been switched on too, and she saw that her brothers were still chewing their *pita*. The light shone on to their peaky, mouselike faces. Avram had tied the towel, which was covered with dark brown stains, around his head like a turban. Father Jichje stood by the sink, polishing the glass of the little oil lamp which was kept burning all night. Oh dear, yes, she had forgotten to clean it! Then Father lit the lamp and came out on the veranda. What was he going to do? Look for her? Heavens, now he would also see the bag of laundry which hadn't been touched yet!

After a while he went back into the room. Mazal, who was observing everything that went on inside as if in a film, suddenly noticed how yellow and drawn her father looked. His eyelids flickered all the time, his beard bobbed nervously up and down and he kept passing his hand across his forehead. Perhaps he was going to have malaria again, like last year? He had had such terrible headaches then, that he had lain motionless on the bench for days on end. What was she to do if that happened again? Mazal was desperate. Grandma had made herb tea, she remembered. But it hadn't helped much. At last, after Jair's father had sent the doctor around to see him with pills and a bottle of medicine, Father had felt better.

But perhaps Father only looked so pale because she had run away or because he had eaten hardly anything today? In a few hours' time his night watch would begin.

Now she was ashamed of having run away like an idiot. Mazal crouched under the window and waited, just like a stray cat waiting for a door to open, so that it can sneak

into the house unnoticed. And all the time she saw her father's tired face before her and his clumsy hands. For the first time it was not fear that oppressed her, fear because of what she had done, but doubt as to whether she had done the right thing.

How she got back into the house that night and into bed, Mazal could not remember. The night must have passed in the twinkling of an eye, without sleep, without dreams. And yet she must have slept and even dreamed. For she felt as if she were clutching her father's ring tightly in her hand, so tightly that at first she could not open her fist. At last she could slowly straighten her stiff fingers and looked at her empty hand in surprise. Only then did she remember Jair, the beach, and their plan to hide the ring together today.

For a few minutes she lay still, without moving. Her brothers had already tumbled out of bed, and were now rushing through their morning prayers. There was no school, Grandmother was not there, Father was asleep . . . and they wanted to go out into the street to play as soon as possible.

Mazal stared in front of her with blank eyes. She tried to remember what she had been thinking last night. And then she suddenly leaped out of bed.

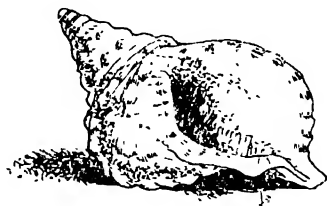
"Ssh!" she warned the boys. Father must not wake up. She knew exactly what she had to do. Tidy up the house, as he had told her, quickly, very quickly, and then run off to the beach to get the ring back. Yes, Mazal was quite sure now. It seemed as if she had grown a year older since yesterday. She wouldn't be able to stop the engagement and she didn't even want to any more.

She sent the two boys outside, and she smoothed

down the beds. Now she must quickly sweep the room, brush up all the dust and the crumbs. There, she had finished. And now she herself must disappear before Father woke up and made her do that washing, thought Mazal. She dashed across the veranda and in her haste did not see that the pile of washing was no longer there.

In the street children were playing with a skipping-rope. They were standing in a long line. Chasila sat on the ground in front of her house, washing clothes. The soap suds bubbled in the low, round basin. The paraffin stove next to it purred and sent out waves of heat, as if the air weren't hot enough already.

"Mazal, come here a moment," shouted Chasila. But Mazal ran past her. "Later," she panted, "when I come back!"



8 ❧ *Where is the Ring, Where is the Shell?*

"I want the ring back," whispered Mazal.

"What?" asked Jair absent-mindedly. Then he became aware of what Mazal had said.

"Have it back?" he repeated. "But we decided to hide it in the water, didn't we?" And he went on eagerly, "You know, I've got a bathing-suit for you. And I've also brought some wire. The ring won't get loose in a hundred years!"

"I want to put the ring back where I found it," answered Mazal with determination. "I don't want to hide it."

Those were plain-spoken words which Jair couldn't

possibly misunderstand, whether he liked them or not. "Why not?" he asked peevishly. He had arranged everything so beautifully, to hide the ring under water, just like a pirate. Was Mazal going to be a spoil-sport now?

Mazal did not reply. How could she explain to him that she had no courage to go on with the whole business? Yesterday she had wanted to do it, and she had been full of daring and courage. But today it was different.

It seemed to Jair that Mazal was just as shy and bashful as she had been yesterday when she had first arrived. But he wasn't going to take any notice of that.

"Come on, let's go in the water," he tempted her.

"No," said Mazal, "I daren't and I don't want to either."

Shrugging his shoulders Jair walked to the wall, and slowly, taking his time, began to put back the stones which had been pulled down by Uuno's sail-cloth. He carried on as if he were all alone on the beach and just left Mazal standing there. She had made such a fuss yesterday, thought Jair. And now, look at her today – too scared to move an inch.

But at last he could not ignore her any longer. With a sigh he picked up his trousers from the sand and with exasperating slowness began to wriggle his penknife out of the little pocket. Now he would even have to break the shell for that little fool. It would have been better if he had given it to Miriam right away. Savagely he grabbed for the shell in his pocket.

In the meantime Mazal had come nearer and held out her hand. She looked the other way, fearing Jair's anger. But Jair stood as if nailed to the ground, unable to understand. The shell wasn't there. Again he felt in both his pockets, shook his trousers, and looked at Mazal in despair. . . . The shell wasn't there.

Mazal didn't realize yet that something was wrong. She just went on standing there, holding out her hand, waiting.

Jair swallowed a few times. "I can't find the ring," he managed to say at last. "I don't know where it is."

This wasn't a joke, Mazal realized. He wasn't trying to tease her now, she saw that. But what was it then? Why didn't he have the ring? She herself had put it in his hand yesterday, and he had promised he would help her. The ring, Father's ring! Oh, what would she do now?

Mazal turned away and put her hands to her face. She began to wail softly and to sway her body. Grandma Cheftziba and Chasila always did that when they were very unhappy. Other children didn't do it, Mazal knew that. Perhaps Jair would laugh at her, but she couldn't help herself, she was too miserable. It didn't occur to Jair to laugh at her. The wailing made him feel awful.

Again and again he fumbled in his trousers pockets, then he sat down on the wall. Where was that shell? Had he been wearing different trousers yesterday? No! His pen-knife was in the little pocket and the pebbles and shells which he had picked up yesterday were there as well. Then the shell must have fallen out of his pocket. But where . . . and how? While he was undressing? But then he would have heard it fall on to the tiled floor. Maybe this morning, when he was running so fast? How would he ever again find the ring?

Just suppose that the shell had dropped out of his trousers here on the beach, when he was in a hurry to go after Uuno and had quickly thrown off his clothes? Hopefully Jair began to search in the sand around the wall. He must find the shell . . . But suppose it was really lying somewhere near here? In that case Uuno, or he

himself, or even Mazal could have trodden on it. Then the fragile shell would have broken to pieces and the ring would have fallen in the sand. And then it would be impossible to find it. Why, oh, why had he ever let himself get involved in this whole business? Mazal was quiet now. Through her fingers she watched Jair desperately searching in the sand. She knelt down by Jair's clothes and began to sieve the sand with nimble fingers. Who knows? Yesterday they had retrieved the ring from the sea. Jair had fished it out. Perhaps that had been a good omen. Mazal went on searching vigorously.

Thank goodness she is quiet, thought Jair, and he said, red with shame, "I hid that ring in a shell." Mazal said nothing. Why did I ever do anything so ridiculous, Jair cursed himself in silence. And he went on, aloud, "We must look for a round white shell, or for the pieces of one. Then the ring must be there too." It sounded absurd, as he heard himself say it.

Now that he was looking for round white shells, the beach seemed to be covered with nothing but white stones and shells. It was a hopeless job. He sighed despondently.

All the same, he began slowly to walk back across the beach. There was nothing else he could do. He returned by the same way that he had come and Mazal was now walking beside him. Their eyes explored every irregularity and they shuffled with their feet in the sand, as if that, too, could help. In their hearts they had little hope, but they simply had to go on.

When they found themselves, for the third time, beside the black rock, Jair stood still. "We shan't find it here," he said, "the shell must have fallen out of my pocket either in the street or at home. I can't understand it."

He sighed again and stared at the sea for a while.

"When you go back, you must walk along close to the houses. That's how I came this morning. Then I turned left . . . so you must turn right this time of course. You're now going in the opposite direction."

Mazal appeared not to have heard him. "I'm going home," she said, almost tonelessly, and then she added, "looking for it won't help anyway. I shouldn't have taken it away. This is the punishment. I should have thought of that yesterday when I lost it in the sea. I'd better go now." She suddenly broke into a run, leaving behind a rather bewildered Jair.

How serious and sad she had been when she had said that. She meant it, Jair was sure of that. It seemed as if she was prepared to undergo any punishment, as if she wanted to be punished.

But why? thought Jair angrily and rebelliously. After all, she hadn't done anything bad. Or at least she hadn't meant anything bad. If anyone was to blame it was he, although he still couldn't understand how that shell had disappeared. How could he possibly have lost it, buried as it was in his pocket under the thick wad of his handkerchief?

For the first time he realized that Mazal hadn't said a single word of reproach to him. She was a very nice kid, really. Much nicer than Miriam and her friends, who were offended or became angry at the slightest provocation.

A warm feeling for this sad, strange girl welled up in him. And Jichje . . . was a rotten fellow, he thought. Why was he thinking of getting married again if Mazal was so scared of having a stepmother? But was she still so scared, Jair wondered, now that she had wanted the ring back?

And now that she was thinking that she deserved punishment? Strange!

If it had happened to me, he thought, well, I would have told everything to Father and then I would simply have waited to see what happened. But to let myself be beaten like this, never! But Mazal is scared. She is scared of everything. Yes, that's what it is!

And suddenly his heart was filled with pity and chivalrous feelings. You know, he decided rashly, I think I'll go to the Police Station. Maybe the honest finder has already handed it in. And I'll search the street inch by inch. Still, who can be sure that the ring is really lost? The shell may simply have fallen out of my pocket at home!

With fresh courage he decided to take Mazal in hand, once the ring had been found. She was just like a sheep being led to the slaughter. And she always did exactly what her old grandmother or her father told her to do. She never played out in the street. No wonder that she looked like a withered old woman and that the children thought she was odd. But he was going to change that now. He would simply call for her at her home and he would see to it that the children in the street would let her play with them. And if anyone dared to laugh at her! He would have Jair to deal with, you could be sure of that!

But Mazal? Would Mazal want to be friends with him at all? She had said hardly a word and had run away without saying good-bye. Oh well, it wasn't surprising really.

Whatever else happened, he must find the ring. Everything depended on that. If only Father would come soon to measure their piece of ground, Jair thought, becoming impatient. At that moment a long, green car appeared on the beach. Without making a sound it glided across the

sand. Jair, who stood with his face turned towards the sea, didn't see it until it stopped right by the wall.

"Hey, what's this," shouted Jair at the car. A man and a boy got out. The man posted himself straddle-legged in front of the pole and, lighting a cigarette, examined the nameplate.

And would you believe it, the boy calmly sat down on his wall. Jair ran towards them, panting, but when he heard their long-drawn-out *shalom*, he realized that they were foreigners – tourists, who had taken him by surprise. There was no need to chase them away. On the contrary, he must welcome them as politely as possible. Maybe they would come and stay with them in a few weeks' time.

"*Shalom, shalom*," he said pleasantly, and looked at the boy, who was sitting crosswise on his wall. What a crazy shirt he was wearing, covered with pictures of flowers and parrots. More suitable for a girl, Jair thought. And those sunglasses with lenses like mirrors. You couldn't see his eyes through them.

The man turned to Jair. "Egypt?" he asked.

Jair gaped at him speechlessly. What kind of a clown was this, who wanted to go from here to Egypt? That was quite impossible. There were soldiers at the Egyptian border, a whole army camp of them. Not a soul could get past, only someone important, like a Minister or an Ambassador, or maybe a President. Perhaps this man was important . . . Jair's eyes passed over the beautiful car and the boy's patterned shirt. It could well be, even though the father was wearing ordinary khaki trousers. Would he be incognito?

Jair pointed to the distant, dark strip of land which stood out clearly against the glittering sea, where it seemed as if the beach came to an end.

"Egypt, away over there," he showed them with a movement of his hand, and then began to explain in Hebrew that you couldn't get there from this direction.

The father shrugged his shoulders with a laugh, but the boy dived into the car and showed Jair a rolled up fishing-line.

Oh, was that the idea? They wanted to go fishing there. Near the Egyptian border. So they wanted to learn from him whether this was the right direction.

"Yes, farther, farther," he pointed. A moment later the car began to move off and glided away. Jair watched it going, as if he were bewitched by it. You could see luxurious cars quite often in Tamaria and the town was always full of foreigners. That in itself was nothing special. But this car and this boy had a magnetic pull on him. For one moment he felt an impulse to shout after them and to call them back, but he controlled himself. What nonsense! The car was now at the end of the beach and moved slowly around the farthest point of the cliff.

A loud hoot gave Jair a start. The small van belonging to the Town Council came reeling across the beach, like a sailing boat on a rough sea. This was something rather different from the green car which had now disappeared from sight.

Father was sitting next to the driver and waved to him. And then Jair saw also the red flag and the measuring rods painted white. It was a sign that his watch on the beach had come to an end.

9 *The “Lost Property” Office*

Twice Jair had painstakingly searched the road to the sea, each time following an overlapping zig-zag course. Even after that, he had still gone on looking. For the umpteenth time he had looked into a hole in the asphalt, lifted a stone which he himself had kicked aside, and let his eyes roam everywhere. But there was nothing lying on the ground and nothing was to be seen.

This was more than enough, he thought. He had done whatever was possible. Now he wanted to go and join his friends. That ring wasn't his business, anyway. If it was lost, it was lost. Let Mazal settle her own affairs. But at the back of his mind there was a steady murmur, “But she *did*

try to put matters right. It was you who started meddling."

And that small yellow face with the dull eyes continued to haunt him. Heavens, how sad that girl could look. He, Jair, had heard people talk about far worse things that had happened a long time ago – for instance – during the war, but it would be no use trying to console her with that.

All right then. He would go and ask at the Police Station, as he had planned. He hoped that Joske was on duty and not Micha, that stupid idiot. He was new to Tamaria and didn't know how to get on with children at all.

Thank goodness, Joske was on duty. He was sitting on the bench playing cards with a tall, thin fellow whom Jair had never seen before.

"Hello, Jair," said Joske absentmindedly. He hardly looked up. "Are you giving yourself up?" and he winked at his opponent, who didn't show the trace of a smile.

"Has anybody found anything?" began Jair timidly. Now what should he ask for? For the shell or for the ring?

Joske pushed his uniform cap to the back of his head and asked, "Has anybody found anything? What do you mean, money or a girl?" And again he winked at the other man. "Just a moment, Jair, we'll have finished in a minute." Joske's eyes did not for a second lose sight of his opponent's hands, and that was not surprising. The way in which those thin fingers manipulated the cards! He looked just like a juggler. Or a card-player who was cheating. You sometimes read about that in the newspapers. His face was smug enough for it, Jair thought.

"Ha, Chaim," called Joske suddenly, throwing down his cards. "Now I've got you. You took two cards instead of one and you put two away as well! No wonder

you always know what the next card is. You give me twenty-five piastres now!"

But the man named Chaim calmly put into Joske's hand the card which he had just taken.

"One or two?" he asked.

Dumbfounded, Joske looked at the card in his hand. He bent it and smoothed it out again, but it *was* only one after all.

"Well I'm blowed," he muttered, wiping the beads of sweat from his forehead. Then he looked sharply at Chaim. "Take off your coat, you. Who on earth wants to wear a coat in this heat?"

In silence Chaim took off his jacket, slowly and meticulously he turned the sleeves inside-out and then the right way again, then he put it on once more. The shirt he was wearing under it was dirty and the sleeves were frayed. But that was probably not the reason why Chaim had so quickly put his jacket on again, thought Jair, who was mistrustful of the whole business.

Chaim pushed the cards together, manipulated them with one hand into a neat pack and stood up.

"While you're dealing with this young man here, I'm going to get some cigarettes," he said to Joske. "I'm sure I shall have time to smoke three packets before those gentlemen are back. Lend me half a pound, will you Joske? You'll get it back as soon as I've been to the bank," he grinned wryly.

Joske put his hand in his pocket. "In the jail you mean." He gave Chaim a half pound note and said, "That makes a pound, Chaim, and that's the limit."

He watched Chaim sauntering away at a leisurely pace. "The fellow has got nerve, I must say. It's Chaim the conjurer. But this time he's got a new occupation. Play-

ing cards! Cheating at it, you understand. I'm trying to find out how he does it before the police car from Be'er Shewa gets here to pick him up."

"What? Has he been arrested?" asked Jair, astonished. "And you let him walk around just like that?"

"Oh, that's nothing. He won't try to escape. How far do you think he'd get without a penny in his pocket?"

Suddenly Joske resumed his dignity as a police officer. "And what have you come here for? Have you found something, did you say, or lost anything?" He disappeared for a moment into the wooden hut which bore the grand title of Police Station, and came out again carrying an exercise-book with a pencil dangling from it.

"The 'Lost Property Department' is splendidly efficient here," beamed Joske. "We've even got a pencil." He sat down and leafed busily through the book. "Well, what was it, lost or found?" he asked.

"Lost," answered Jair hesitantly. He was suddenly sorry he had come to the Police Station at all. Because . . . what should he say? That he had lost a ring . . . what kind of a ring . . . ? An engagement ring! He could already hear Joske roaring with laughter. And it was even more idiotic to ask for a shell. Joske would certainly send him to a psychiatrist, or to the beach. "You go and ask the sea," Joske would say. And if he didn't want to look an absolute fool, he would have to start by telling the truth about Mazal. But no, that was impossible. How could he get himself out of this? thought Jair despondently.

"Well, what about it?" Joske was becoming impatient.

"Has anybody found anything and brought it here?" asked Jair.

"Well did you ever! What business is that of yours? That's an official secret, my boy. What have *you* lost?

That's what matters. Your satchel, a purse with money . . ." Joske suggested.

"A ring," Jair blurted out. "A ring in a shell."

"A ring in a shell," repeated Joske, and began automatically to write it down. Suddenly he looked up. "Hey, Jair, have you gone barmy? You must have heard too many fishermen's stories! A ring in a shell! Now if it had been a fish with a ring inside! That does happen sometimes, I'm told. Once in a thousand years . . . in a thousand . . . well, not in the last thousand years, let's say. Come on, Jair, out with it. Is it your mother's ring you've lost?"

"Yes, yes," agreed Jair hastily. "It is. I had found a double shell and then I made a bet with Raffi that I could slip a ring into the shell so that it couldn't be seen. And then . . ." he faltered. What a pack of lies he was telling! "And then you lost the shell and the ring," Joske completed. "I say, you'll catch it at home won't you? And tell me, did it work?"

"What? Oh, the shell. Yes, sure, it was shut, as firm as a rock." And just as Jair was about to tell him how he glued the shell together with white of egg - at least that was the truth - he noticed that Joske wasn't listening any more. Chaim, the card-player, was coming around the corner.

"You see my boy, he doesn't even think of running away," said Joske to Jair. "On the contrary, he wants to try to win his borrowed money from me outright. Oh yes, I'll be on the look out for that ring of yours. I'll write it down." He scribbled hastily in his exercise-book, reading it aloud as he wrote.

"*Lost : Ring in shell, or shell without ring, or ring.* All right like that? Bit complicated for Micha, actually." He gave Jair a wink. "Drop in tomorrow to ask."

It was really very good of Joske to write it down so

seriously, thought Jair. After all, you could tell that he didn't really believe that the shell would be handed in at the office.

"See you then, Joske, and thanks a lot." Then Jair bent over to Joske and whispered, for Chaim was quite near now, "Listen, next time when you play cards with . . . er . . . you know who, look in the lining of his left sleeve. It's loose."

One good turn deserves another, thought Jair, and disappeared.





The Mystery is Solved

Now there was only one other place where Jair had not yet looked, and that was his own home. However, he didn't feel much like going home and running the risk of meeting Mazal in the street. No, anything but that.

Jair was still wavering in the street when he suddenly saw Raffi and Miriam. They came storming towards him like a couple of Red Indians on the warpath. And when they were near him they whooped with joy and began a dance of victory.

What a lot of shouting and screaming! Jair put his fingers in his ears.

"Where have you been, Jair?" Raffi was so excited that he kept jumping up and down.

"Here, this is for you!" shouted Miriam triumphantly, and held out her hand in order to give him something.

Whatever next? Did Miriam think she could make up for her childish pranks of yesterday by giving him a piece of chocolate or chewing-gum? Jair shrugged his shoulders and ignored her outstretched hand.

Miriam took no notice of his straight face and his reluctance to accept her gift. She showed him the money in her open hand and said, "Here, for you. Come on, take it."

When Jair, in amazement, took the thirty piastres, Raffi burst out, "Well, what do you say to that? I earned that for you. And he gave me a pound for my stuff." Raffi rattled on, "A whole pound. And you don't know the best thing yet. From now on we're going to sell our finds ourselves. At the hotel. Mr. Rimon suggested it himself. Won't Hassan be surprised!" And in his excitement Raffi slapped his thighs with his hands.

"What are you talking about?" asked Jair impatiently.

Miriam danced round him. "You must thank me actually. I had almost sold it myself. If I hadn't shown that shell to Raffi . . ."

"Then you would have sold it to Hassan for five or even for only three piastres," Raffi interrupted her. "No, listen to this, Jair. I was in the middle of the street . . ." Raffi stopped in surprise, because Jair suddenly got hold of Miriam like a cat, by the scruff of the neck, and shook her fiercely.

"What shell are you talking about?" shouted Jair heatedly. "Did you sell a shell of mine? The one I had yesterday? Come on, tell me!"

"Ouch! Let me go, you idiot! Ouch! You're hurting me! I sold it as a surprise for you. Honestly, it wasn't for myself . . . why are you so angry?" And Miriam looked at Jair with frightened eyes.

But Jair was not listening any longer. He flung her roughly aside and shot like an arrow down the street. He must go to Hassan as quickly as possible and try to buy the shell back. If Hassan didn't want to give it back, he would borrow money from Mother and offer him more for it. If only he could get there in time . . . if only the shell hadn't been sold in the meantime. . . . It didn't occur to Jair that it was strange and improbable that Hassan had paid thirty piastres for a shell. He just went on running.

Miriam rubbed her painful neck and Raffi watched Jair running away into the distance as if he had gone mad.

"What's come over him all of a sudden! Instead of saying thank you, he puffs himself up like a turkey! Where's he running to in such a hurry? Come on, Miriam, let's go after him." And Raffi started to run, followed by Miriam.

Raffi had a hard time trying to catch up with Jair, who was already crossing the square to the hotel. Miriam had been left far behind. Raffi saw Jair making straight for Hassan. A new group of people had gathered round the stall.

"Hassan, Hassan!" Raffi heard Jair shout. "Wait a moment! I want my shell back. Don't sell it, please!"

At first Hassan paid no attention to Jair's shouting, and then it seemed as if he didn't listen on purpose. But Jair persisted and raised his fist in front of Hassan's face.

"Hassan, you haven't sold it yet have you?" Jair asked urgently. "A double shell, a white one with pink lines. Here are the thirty piastres you gave for it. Where is it? I must have it back." The suspense made Jair flush.

But Hassan laughed loudly and tapped with his stick on his wooden leg. "I gave thirty piastres for a shell, you say? And now I get them back? Ha ha, that's a good one . . ." he laughed breezily. "Give me the money. Here's my box of shells. If yours is in it, you can take it out. Or else another one. It's all the same to me." Hassan held out his hand, at the same time pushing the box of shells over to Jair.

In the meantime Raffi had come nearer. "Jair! Jair!" he called, "he hasn't got the shell. Listen, you duffer!"

That penetrated to Jair. However, not only Jair had heard it, but Hassan too.

"Aha! Have you come to pinch some more of my customers?" he roared at Raffi. "Yes, my boy, don't you think I didn't see you just now! And all that whispering with Mr. Rimón, what was all that about?"

The two boys had turned away and were not listening to Hassan any more. Jair pulled Raffi away from the stall and the people around it. "What do you know about that shell?" he snarled.

"I told you everything," answered Raffi. "But you wouldn't listen." And again he told Jair how he had sold his shells, and then about the encounter with the Italian boy, Michel, and his father at the hotel. When Jair heard this, he gave Raffi a hard bang on the shoulder. "A father and a boy did you say? Have they got a green car?"

"How do you know?" asked Raffi, surprised in his turn. "Yes, they do have a green car. A fantastic car, as big as a house. That Italian wants to go diving for shells with us, says Mr. Rimón. But why are you so worried about the shell?"

"So that boy has the shell?" asked Jair, without answering Raffi's question.

"Yes."

"And it wasn't broken? Split in two halves I mean?"

"Of course not. It was shut, very tight. Miriam said she heard it tinkle and that's really true."

"Miriam says it tinkles," grunted Jair indignantly, but he was relieved at the same time. "It's all Miriam's fault. I'll get even with her for this. But first I must go after that green car. Are you coming, Raffi? I'll tell you everything on the way."

Raffi itched to hear what was so special about that shell and why it was so necessary for Jair to get it back. Of course he would go with Jair, and they began to retrace their steps. "Where are we going, actually?" Raffi asked at last.

"To the South Beach . . . and maybe right to the Egyptian border," answered Jair.

"But, Jair, that's more than three hours' walking! You're nuts!" And Raffi stood still.

"I've got to go. Come on, maybe we'll get a lift," said Jair.

On the way they met Miriam, who hadn't hurried when she realized she couldn't overtake the boys anyway.

Jair tightened his lips. He felt like giving her a good beating, but he didn't want to lose any time.

"Go home, you," he said gruffly. "Tell Mother that I'm staying with Father on the beach. Raffi and I are going over there." Raffi received a hard kick on the shin, by which Jair warned him not to ask or say anything. Jair didn't want Miriam to come along on any account.

"I want to go to Father too," began Miriam, with a glance at Raffi, who was rubbing his leg. If Jair was speaking so openly about Father being on the beach, she could do the same. "Yes, Jair, I . . ."

Jair interrupted her. "If you don't clear off right this minute, I'll tell Mother that you pinched my shell," he snarled. "You ought to leave my things alone. Little thieving cat!"

Raffi looked with surprise at his friend. Jair must be furious with Miriam, because Raffi had never heard him talk to her like this before.

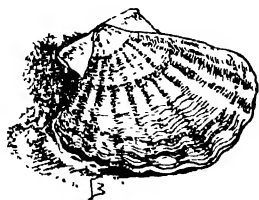
Miriam was so taken aback that she gasped for breath like a fish on dry land. Tears jumped into her eyes and she turned round quickly. She didn't want Raffi and Jair to see she was crying. And suddenly she ran away.

"Go past my house too and tell them I'm staying with Jair on the beach. We'll be home late!" Raffi shouted after her.

"She pretends she hasn't heard," he said to Jair. "Now it's my fault I suppose. That just puts the lid on it!"

"Never mind," consoled Jair. "I'm sure she'll tell them at home. And if she doesn't, oh well, bad luck. Mother will probably think we're with Father. You don't know anything about that yet. Listen . . ."

At a fast pace the two friends walked the familiar road once again, in the direction the green car had taken Michel, and on the way Jair told his friend everything that had happened to him since the previous morning.



II *Chasila Finds a Way*

The white sheets and towels filled almost the entire yard round Chasila's house. There wasn't a breath of wind, but the sun absorbed the moisture as a piece of blotting-paper absorbs drops of ink.

Chasila, who had just reached the end of the two clothes lines – stretched between the two adjoining houses – walked back to where she had started hanging out the washing and began to take the clothes off the line.

“Nothing better than this dry heat for a lovely white wash,” she shouted to her friend, while she wiped beads of sweat from her forehead and her eyes.

Her other friend on the right, Shoshanna Mizrachi, sat

in front of her open door. She was feeding her baby, while all the time she was chatting busily with Chasila. And every time Chasila, her head tied up in a purple scarf so that she looked just like a sorceress, popped up at the other end of the yard, the friend on the left continued with her side of the conversation.

Sometimes they were unable to make themselves heard from one end of the yard to the other. Then the chatter turned into such shouts that the men, who were playing tric-trac across the road, thought there was a flaming row going on.

This double conversation had as its subject the most important event that had happened in this part of the world since yesterday. This was, of course, the departure of Grandma Cheftziba.

Mrs. Shoshanna thought it was shameful that Jichje had simply sen' her away. You didn't do a thing like that, letting an old woman travel all by herself. She was quite sure that Cheftziba had never arrived at her daughter's home.

But before Chasila could hear the end of this, she had reached the other side, where Mrs. Jaffa Chermon, who sold fruit and vegetables, was sorting onions. "A good thing for Jichje and his family that Grandma Cheftziba has gone," she called to Chasila. Cheftziba hardly ever bought vegetables in her store.

Jaffa Chermon had to start shouting louder and louder, for Chasila had now gone into the house with a pile of dry washing. But this didn't stop her from going on with the conversation. Loudly she announced that it was a good thing that soon there would be a wedding in their street. She had heard that Jichje wanted to celebrate his engagement in a few days' time.

“What do you think, Shoshanna?” her piercing voice rasped across the yard. “Do you think that Channa will get all those lovely necklaces of Jichje’s first wife? Or do you think he’ll keep them for Mazal? You can never tell what those Yemenites are up to. They keep everything quiet!”

“Of course they’ll tell you, you nosy old pry. Just you, nobody else. They’ll know better than that!” Chabib Mizrachi shouted from the other side of the street, interrupting the exciting tric-trac game for a moment. “Then they might just as well broadcast it on the radio. What’s it got to do with you, what Jichje does with his jewels!” And he pushed the pieces across the board with such ferocity that they jumped out of the wooden tric-trac box.

His father, who was sitting on a low stool in a corner, sucking at his hookah, shook his bald head, on which he was wearing a brightly embroidered skullcap.

“Don’t bother about Jaffa Chermon,” he said to his son. “It’s better to have nothing to do with her.”

Metsouda, Chabib’s wife, was baking *felafel* in the room which was also a café. She made little round balls from the dough in front of her – a strongly spiced mash of peas – and let them slide into the hot oil. As soon as the balls turned a golden brown, Metsouda put them in a scooped out *pita*, together with a pickled gherkin, a hot red pepper and a tomato. On top of all this came a large spoonful of sauerkraut and a dash of bean oil.

When she had made up three or four of these helpings, Chabib’s father would totter over to her and take the *felafel* back to the tric-trac players.

Metsouda turned off the paraffin stove and wiped her hands on her stained apron, which she then threw into a corner.

"I'm just going to see Shoshanna for a moment," she said.

On the other side of the road the conversation was now being carried on by four voices. Chasila had taken in almost all the washing and now sat crouching by Shoshanna and her sister-in-law, who was rocking the baby.

"You can say what you like," said Metsouda in a loud voice, "but Jichje has good children. He can thank old Cheftziba for that. Take those twins, for instance. Small as they are, they sit every morning with their noses in their books. And they deliver the laundry, and never a mistake, you know! Do you think I can send my children to do my errands for me? Not on your life! They come home with ice cream instead of bread."

"And my Shaoul," sighed Chasila, "he sleeps or he goes off with his friends. All through the holidays it has been like that. Helping his father, like Mazal does, it just doesn't enter his head. Mazal always has to be at Jichje's beck and call, and she is, too. Those Yemenites know how to bring up their children, you can be sure of that. And then . . ."

The shrill voice of Jaffa interrupted her. The soft tomatoes, overripe because of the hot weather, which she couldn't even sell as cooking tomatoes any more, were driving her furious. And so someone would have to suffer for it.

"Mazal!" she said viciously. "That miserable, measly little lemon! She doesn't even dare to go out into the street. You ought to see her sneaking about. A yellow slug, that's what she is! And those secretive eyes of hers! She daren't look you in the face with them. You must watch out for those underhand creatures. They're sly dogs, all of them. When Mazal comes into the store I say

to Nissim, 'Nissim, keep an eye on the carrots! She might try to pinch something!'"

Jaffa turned to her son, who had just emerged from the back of the shop and wanted to say something. "Be quiet, Nissim! Pick up that box and throw the rubbish out," she ordered.

During all this talk Metsouda, who was rocking the baby, and Shoshanna had been exchanging amused glances. Shoshanna shrugged her shoulders and began to talk to Metsouda about her baby's inflamed eyes. Chasila shook her head. Jaffa was awful, she thought. She dripped with venom! Really, she was the bane of the street. Listen to her, raging about that innocent child. And only because she had such a wretched temper and because she was jealous of other people's children. As if it were their fault that she had only a good-for-nothing son. Mazal, that poor kid, was as pure as gold, and Chasila concluded her reflections with a vigorous squirt of spit in Jaffa's direction.

But what was this? There was Mazal, deathly pale, leaning against the wall with her eyes closed. It looked as if she were going to faint. Could she have heard that nonsense of Jaffa's?

Chasila hurried towards Mazal and took her firmly by the arm.

"What's the matter with you? Are you ill?" she asked. But then she saw that the girl was crying without making a sound.

Mazal looked at her with such misery in her eyes that for a moment Chasila didn't know what to say or do. But that didn't last long. With her hands on her hips, as if she wanted to start a fight, she shouted menacingly at Jaffa, "If you open your ugly mouth once again to that poor

innocent child, I'll send Hassan after you. You'd better watch out for his stick! You with your dirty, mean talk!"

Then she took Mazal by the shoulder and pushed her into the house, at the same time snatching the dry washing from the lines.

"Right, now we'll have a cup of coffee together. That will do you good," she said to Mazal. "Don't you worry about Jaffa, my dear. Huh, that witch!" She stuffed back the loose strands of reddish hair under the purple headscarf and then lit the paraffin stove.

"What did she say? What did she mean?" whispered Mazal.

"What's that you're saying? I can't hear you," said Chasila.

Mazal repeated her questions.

"I'm telling you, Mazal, you mustn't listen to Jaffa. She chokes with venom because she's got a boy that won't learn his lessons at school."

In the meantime Chasila was busily pottering about. She put the coffee-pot on the flame, pulled a bowl of onions towards her and sat down on the bench.

"Come and sit next to me, dear, that's nice and comfy. Just like Cheftziba," suggested Chasila. It was out before she realized what she had said. Oh how stupid she was! Chasila could have hit herself. To say that just at this moment. The poor child did nothing but cry as it was.

Then it started in earnest. Big tears dripped between Mazal's fingers and she sobbed so violently that it made Chasila's heart hurt.

"Come on, my dear," Chasila tried to console her. "Grandma Cheftziba will come back all right. Once your father is married I'm sure he'll ask her to come back."

This only made things worse, louder sobs, bigger tears. But now it was more than Chasila could bear.

"Come on, Mazal," she began, a little more sternly. "Your father needs a wife. And the sooner the better." Chasila had quite forgotten that she used to agree wholeheartedly with Grandma Cheftziba's objections.

"Who looks after the poor man now?" she went on. "And who will do the washing? Cheftziba is too old, and you yourself are too young. And as for me, I can't always do other people's jobs for them. Oh no, you just let Channa Shimoni see to all that. She'll be only too glad when a good Yemenite like your father puts a wedding ring on her finger."

The sobbing stopped. As if she had been bitten by a snake, Mazal jumped up from the bench on to which Chasila had gently pushed her.

"I didn't do it on purpose," she almost shrieked. "You and Jaffa think that I've stolen it!"

Chasila didn't understand anything of this outburst. She shook the overexcited child gently, then she took her in her strong arms and laid her on the bed in the corner of the room.

"You're a bit confused, poor child. What's got into your head? Just take it easy now," Chasila tried to calm her.

"But the ring, Chasila," wailed Mazal again. "What did you say about the ring?"

Slowly, Chasila began to understand that Mazal's flood of tears was not only due to Grandma's departure or to her father's wedding plans. She took up the bowl of onions and sat down on the floor by the bed. All the time her hands were peeling the onions, tears in her eyes because of the strong smell, she smiled at Mazal. "Come on,

my sweet. Don't get so upset. You tell Chasila what's the matter. It can't be worth so many tears, my dear, I'm sure. Man was born to laugh, Hassan always says."

Gradually, bit by bit, the whole story came out – the meeting with Jair and the loss of the ring.

Chasila listened attentively, shaking her head in amazement. How did the child get it into her head to prevent her father's marriage by taking the ring away? She would never have thought that Mazal had it in her. This is punishment from above, she thought with alarm. But just like Jair on the beach, earlier, she too thought that Mazal did not deserve to be punished. After all, she had wanted to put things right again. Something would have to be done about it.

Chasila looked at Mazal, who was lying on the bed, pale and exhausted. It was high time this child learned to laugh. All that "adness! It was enough to make her ill. She was suddenly reminded of all the happy children in Pioneers' Street, her own son, his friends and their sisters, none of whom ever worried about anything. Even Mazal's brothers were not like her. Perhaps Channa Shimoni would be willing and able to bring about a change.

But, Chasila considered, if Channa heard that Mazal had tried to hold up the wedding plans, would she still want to have anything to do with such a stubborn child? And she would certainly get to know about it if the ring, which Jichje wanted to give her at the engagement party, were not there.

Suddenly Chasila had an idea. "I suppose it was a very special kind of ring, wasn't it?" she asked slyly. "A Yemenite ring, like your grandma has. With bunches of grapes and little round shapes, a broad one. Your grandma only wore it on Saturdays."

Mazal shook her head. "No," she said, "just a very narrow ring, a smooth one. Father must have bought a new one. There was still a piece of paper around it, tied with a red thread." Her word ended in a sob.

"Oh no, don't start again, please," soothed Chasila, and she went on, "you know what? You just stay in bed and sleep for a few hours. It'll do you good. I'll tell your father that you are going to stay with me for a few days. He'll have to look after your brothers himself. He's already got rid of the washing. And . . . maybe Jair will find the ring in the meantime. If he doesn't, I'll find a way out somehow. You know what Hassan says, Mazal? Chasila, my old sorceress, always finds a way out!" and she laughed heartily at herself. Then she put the onions on to stew and said cheerfully, "Well, I'll get on with the washing."

But Mazal sat up in alarm. "Chasila," she begged anxiously, "you're not going to tell anything to Shaoul or to Hassan, are you? And Chasila, please don't tell my father. I . . . he . . . I'd . . . rather he beat me to death than have him hear that I've taken the ring away."

He's bound to hear about it, thought Chasila, unless a miracle happens, but aloud she said, "Not a word, my dear, I promise you. Now be quiet and go to sleep."

Outside, while she was taking in the last of the washing, Chasila brooded over Mazal's bad luck. Her first thought – to put a ring of Mazal's mother in its place – she rejected. Jichje would see at once that it wasn't the same ring. In any case, Mazal would never dare to carry out such a plan. And wasn't it really tempting the devil, too, to give to the second wife a ring that had belonged to the first? She wouldn't dare do that, she didn't want to have that on her conscience. Her own rings . . . ? Alas, she didn't have them any more. Ten years ago they had had to sell them, when

Hassan had lost his leg in that accident. He had had to travel to the north in an ambulance so often, because there wasn't a doctor down here in those days.

Chasila, in her mind's eye, saw the rings before her again, on the blue velvet lining of her brass jewel box. She sighed heavily. Oh well, what was the use of worrying about that now. There hadn't been a narrow gold band among them anyway.

But one ring she had kept. It was a lucky ring with engraved characters. Her mother had given it to her, when she was still in Turkey. That ring she hadn't dared to sell. It was lying in the cupboard, behind the clothes. Only the other day she had held it in her hand. The Arabic magic signs – gold on a silver background – had had exactly the same spell on her as before. Unfortunately, it didn't fit on her rough, swollen fingers any longer, not even on her little finger. This ring was for younger, thinner fingers, like hers had been when she was just married

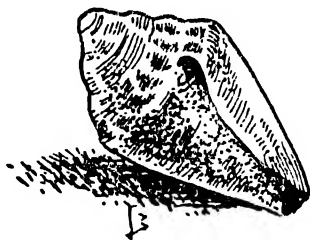
A lucky ring was just as good as a wedding ring, thought Chasila. Maybe even better. Yet it had been lying in the cupboard for years. Wouldn't there be somebody who could give me a wedding ring in exchange for my lucky ring, wondered Chasila, a wedding ring, to put in place of the lost one? Or would she chase luck out of the house if she did that? No! To sell a lucky ring, that you couldn't do. But to help a poor unhappy child with it, surely that couldn't bring misfortune.

Chasila shook her head several times in order to free herself from the doubt that was nagging her. Then she began to think about the rings of the women she knew. Who amongst them had a simple, narrow wedding ring? But she saw only their hands in her mind's eye. Shoshanna Mizrachi's beautiful smooth hands with the long, bright-

red painted nails, which she was always busy polishing? Jaffa's thick hands with black rims under the nails and callouses on the thumbs? Or Metsouda's small brown hands – thin and covered with blisters from frying *felafel*? But no matter how hard Chasila tried, she couldn't remember their rings.

Resolutely she threw the washing in a pile and left her work for the twentieth time that day. On tiptoe she moved about the room, where Mazal was now sleeping quietly, with a red flush on her cheeks. Cautiously Chasila took the lucky ring from the back of the cupboard. It was wrapped in a white handkerchief. For a moment she weighed the ring in her hand, and then went out of the house.

Chasila was the second person to start looking for a ring that day.



12 *Fair Exchange*

It's a good thing I get on well with everybody, thought Chasila, pleased with herself as she left the yard.

On the way she threw a quick glance at Jaffa's money-counting hands. No, Jaffa Chermon didn't wear a wedding ring, she saw that at once.

An odd creature, Jaffa, thought Chasila. She came from Morocco and considered only her fellow-countrymen of any consequence. Grandma Cheftziba too, had been inclined to behave in that way. She had never mixed with anyone except Yemenites. Therefore she had had no contact with anybody in the street. Chasila, however, had taken no notice of this attitude and they had become very good friends.

Chasila was on good terms with everybody, whether

they came from Iraq, like the Mizrachi family, which was so large that there were Mizrachis in every street in Tamaria; or from Hungary, where the Harars came from. And Moshe the grocer was a Roumanian and Raffi's father and mother had come from Germany. You could get to know the whole world in this street, thought Chasila proudly. There were people from at least ten different countries, and they all had their own customs and traditions. But two things they most certainly all had in common. Every family had children who were born in Israel and every woman would surely have some kind of wedding ring.

With these thoughts Chasila strolled down the road. She called out a greeting here and stopped for a little chat there. But she always went on, after throwing a furtive glance at the busy hands of the women.

From the grocer's shop came a frightening cackling. Chasila went in for a second and took up a *pita*. "I'll come for the rest in a minute!" she called to Moshe. Meanwhile her eagle's eyes wandered along the hands of some twelve women who stood waiting in an untidy line. But Chasila saw that unfortunately there were hardly any rings on the calloused, the manicured, the rough and the smooth fingers. Ah . . . today is washing day for most women, she remembered. I hadn't thought of that, although I've been washing too, for hours and hours. The rings were in the homes, on the kitchen tables. How can I get my eye on them, she wondered.

Chasila was slowly becoming obsessed by all those rings which she could not see. She was almost on the point of walking into the first house she passed, to ask whether she could have a look at the housewife's rings.

But then Mazal's secret would have spread like wildfire through the street.

Inspired by all those ringless hands she was suddenly reminded of two small hands which she had never yet seen without rings – Chasma Mizrachi, the wife of Natan, Chabib's brother. She looked searchingly around the shop, and then went out quickly. The women were very surprised that Chasila hadn't stopped for a chat.

Chasila hurried away straight to Chasma's house. Why hadn't she thought of her before! No one had so many jewels as Chasma – rings, ear-rings and bracelets. If there was an ordinary wedding ring to be found anywhere, it must be at Chasma's. She had been married only a short time ago, here in Israel. Chasila knocked at the door of Chasma's house, which stood half open.

"Come in," called a plaintive voice.

Chasila pushed the door wide open. On the floor sat Chasma, a fragile little doll with black hair, playing with her puppy. There were saucepans and plates standing all over the place, and there was a strong smell of paraffin, as if someone had upset a stove or a bottle.

What a mess, thought Chasila as she entered. You could see at once that Chasma was not used to lifting a finger. Her father had a big hotel in Iraq and was rich. He had four sons and a daughter. Being the only daughter, Chasma had lived at home like a queen, spoiled by her father and brothers. Metsouda, with her sharp tongue, had told Chasila all this.

And now, here in Israel, Natan treated her like a princess, although he himself was only a humble fisherman. When Natan was at home he did the cooking and the washing, and when he was out with the fishing fleet he sent his little wife to his brother's café for her meals.

Chasila looked attentively at the slender girl. Really, she did look like a princess! But her house . . . it was exactly like a pigsty.

On the table were some onions and a rather dirty cloth. A hunk of white cheese lay on the floor. The puppy must have been nibbling at it.

"Good morning, Chasila." Chasma jumped up, pleased. It did not occur to her to apologize for the disorder, although she knew quite well what good manners demanded, for she put the coffee-pot on the paraffin stove at once, to make a cup of coffee.

"Good morning, Chasma," Chasila greeted her, "how are you?"

"As you see," sighed Chasma. "No energy, Chasila, no energy. When Natan isn't at home I don't feel like doing anything."

She pulled out the charm which hung around her neck and kissed it.

"When is Natan coming back?" asked Chasila, who had been having a good look around in the meantime. It was just as she had expected. There were no rings on the kitchen table here, and there were no tubs of washing either. But she did notice that Chasma had, on almost every finger, several glittering rings, which she kept turning around nervously. However, Chasila did not see any wedding ring.

"My Natan isn't coming back for another week," answered Chasma, and sat down next to Chasila.

"Why don't you go to the doctor and ask him for some energy pills? They help marvellously," advised Chasila, while her brain was working feverishly. How could she bring the conversation around to the ring?

But it seemed as if an invisible ghost were directing the conversation between them.

"Energy pills did you say, Chasila? Do you think they could help me?" asked Chasma suspiciously. And plaintively she went on, "I'm only in good health when Natan is at home. You don't know how difficult it is for me. I've never had to do any work before, and now . . . I'm not used to it." Listlessly she took up a cloth and wiped a corner of the table clean.

"Natan helps me with everything," she went on in a whining voice. "But he always goes off again. And then I'm so worried. I don't sleep a wink when he's at sea. Honestly, Chasila."

"You can't keep fishermen at home," said Chasila. "That's the way things are. They've got it in their blood. But you know, Chasma, it's a good profession and not all that dangerous. There's no reason why it should keep you awake at night."

"What do you know about that, Chasila?" answered Chasma reproachfully. "Just think of those heavy nets that could make the boat capsize. And then the sharks! Did you know they often see sharks?" And again Chasma kissed her charm. "Your husband is a lot safer, sitting in front of the hotel, I can tell you that, Chasila."

Chasila suddenly brought out her lucky ring and put it on the table. "You kiss your charm, Chasma . . . it reminds me of my lucky ring. I've kissed it so often, for my Hassan, that wild old boy. At one time I thought it wasn't worth anything. But now I know better." Chasila was silent for a moment.

Chasma did not seem to listen. With envious eyes she looked at the ring. Playfully she put it on her finger.

"It looks lovely, doesn't it?" she asked, examining it

admiringly. "Where did you get it from? I suppose it's very valuable? How much is it worth?"

"I don't know anything about its value," answered Chasila. "I expect it's about the same as . . . as an ordinary wedding ring." Again her eyes passed over the little hands with so many rings, and she went on, "I'll tell you this, Chasma. A lucky ring doesn't always work. At that time – when Hassan broke his leg and when he was so ill afterwards, I could almost have thrown it into the sea. But now I thank Heaven for Hassan's wooden leg. There'll be no more dangerous scaffoldings for him. He won't be the cock of the walk any more. Yes, you can look at me with big eyes, Chasma. That's what that hothead of mine was like, always wanting to be number one. Yes, I can honestly say that this ring has brought me luck. And now it has been lying in the cupboard for years." Chasila took a deep breath. There, she had said what had to be said.

Chasma had been listening with wide open eyes. "So that ring has protected your Hassan," she began. "And now . . . it has been lying in the cupboard for years, you said . . . please, Chasila, give me that ring! I'll give you another one in exchange for it." And with a flourish Chasma took off her rings, as if she were prepared to hand them all to Chasila.

But Chasila hesitated. Now that it had come to this point, she was in doubt again. Was it right for her to exchange the ring? And in any case, did Chasma have a wedding ring at all?

Chasila spread out the rings which lay glittering on the rough wooden table. Yes indeed, there was a narrow, modern wedding ring amongst them. It must have been hidden at first under that shiny green agate. Chasila's heart began to beat faster now.



"Well, what about it?" asked Chasma impatiently. Chasila took the thin wrist between her fingers and moved the little hand with the lucky ring on it to and fro in front of Chasma's longing eyes. "I've told you already," repeated Chasila, "it isn't worth more than a wedding ring." She picked up the wedding ring from the table. "Would you give this one for it?" she asked doubtfully, and added, "but what will Natan say when he misses your wedding ring, Chasma?"

Chasma only half listened. She was like a little girl who can't take her eyes off a friend's toy. It didn't even strike her how odd it really was that Chasila was asking just for this simple wedding ring, whereas she could have chosen from so many lovely ones.

"So now the lucky ring is mine," said Chasma gaily, clapping her hands softly. "You must admit, Chasila, it's very beautiful?" she exclaimed with delight. Then she added, "Now I'm not afraid to be alone any more. Really, Chasila, right this moment I feel quite different already. I'm going to tidy up the house in a minute."

What a child she is still, thought Chasila, laughing. "You mean the ring does a much better job than energy pills! That's fine. You can start now, Chasma. Look at the coffee." And she pointed to the coffee-pot which was bubbling over.

"I'd forgotten all about the coffee," said Chasma, alarmed, and hurried to pick up a cloth.

Chasila watched with approval at the way Chasma cleaned the stove. Indeed, it seemed as if the lucky ring had already performed miracles. It had to be like this, Chasila concluded. Chasma needs the lucky ring and I need the wedding ring. So there will be a blessing on both of us.

Together they peacefully drank a cup of sweet coffee, spiced with coriander. Afterwards Chasila left with Chasma's wedding ring wrapped in a handkerchief, hidden in her clothes.

It was only on the way back that she realized that she herself had had no benefit from the transaction. Indeed, she had lost her own ring. But she didn't dwell on this for long. She had done it in order to help Mazal and Jichje, and even Grandmother Cheftziba, although the old lady wasn't aware of it yet. It was all done for a good cause and therefore good luck wouldn't turn away from her house, thought Chasila.

Now the main problem was to smuggle the ring into Jichje's cupboard. Near home she met Jichje. He was on his way to the café. "I say, have you seen Mazal by any chance?" he asked her.

"No, I haven't seen her for quite a while. Well, I'm going to fold the washing now, then I'll put it all in your house," she said busily. "Is the door open, Jichje?"

"Goodness, woman," said Jichje shocked. "What a suggestion! A man isn't his own master in an open house. Especially when his own daughter doesn't know that it's her duty to look after the house and goods. But of course you can go in. The key is between the blind and the window."

Chasila did not reply to this. Afterwards she would have a talk with him about Mazal. She would be careful not to betray anything that wasn't meant for his ears. But first, now that there was no one in the house, she had to make use of this opportunity.

She watched Jichje's retreating back, as he shuffled along in the direction of Chabib's hut. That man was nothing but skin and bones. Jichje might be able to talk

well and learnedly, but looking after himself, no, he wasn't capable of that. Ah well, that would soon be Channa Shimoni's task. I have done what I could, concluded Chasila, satisfied. She went into Moshe's store and asked for a piece of white tissue paper. On the veranda of her own house she looked in her sewing-box for some red cotton.

Armed with tissue paper and cotton, Chasila walked past her own door and disappeared into Jichje's house, her face showing nothing unusual.

13 *The Hunt for the Ring*

While Mazal was sleeping quietly in Chasila's house, Jair and Raffi trudged through the sand. Jair looked steadily at the ground. He was hot and irritable. The sun burned on his back and his eyes stung.

"For all I care a big wave could come and swallow the whole lot," he grunted, looking darkly at the bright blue sea.

"And what would happen to your new guest house?" asked Raffi. The bit in Jair's story about the hotel had interested him most of all. Mazal and her ring had left him cold. Raffi simply thought that Jair shouldn't have got mixed up in Mazal's affairs.

When they came to the spot where he had kept watch so faithfully, Jair cheered up a bit. The surveyors' red flags stood in a large circle round the pole. His wall did good service. He saw that the surveyors were sitting in its shade, drinking their tea.

Of course Raffi wanted to stay, but Jair pushed him on. "First we must get hold of that ring, Raff," he said.

The mountains on the other side of the water shone purple and pink across the bay, which looked like silver in the distance. But Jair and Raffi had no eyes for the beauty of the scene around them. They chased over the sand as if they were taking part in a race. Sometimes they peered into the hazy distance, with their hands shielding their eyes, to where the open sea began and where tiny dots and lines were dancing up and down.

Who could tell what those distant dots were? Even with binoculars it was impossible to distinguish a fishing-boat from a collapsible rubber dinghy. Perhaps they were the fins of the sharks which sometimes visited the bay. Or maybe one of those dots was Uuno, in search of his sea devil?

But they had no luck. Neither Uuno nor any other fishermen passed them during their walk along the sea-shore.

Before they realized it, they had arrived at the first notice indicating that they were now near to the frontier. The notice said "50 METRES".

"Soon we'll come to the army camp too," said Raffi, pointing to a barbed-wire fence which started somewhere in the sea a bit farther on, and ran across the beach, to vanish far behind the cliffs.

"Do you think they're behind it?" asked Jair. "That father of Michel's didn't look like an ordinary chap to me.

Maybe they let him in here, maybe he parked his car in there. But how do we find out?"

They walked on in silence. Within a short distance they had to stop again. There were so many warning signs that Jair and Raffi did not dare to ignore them. They read:

STOP! YOU ARE APPROACHING THE FRONTIER
DANGER! MINEFIELDS!

ENTRY ONLY PERMITTED WITH SPECIAL PASS!
NO ENTRANCE!

They looked at each other. "What now?" asked Raffi. Then they saw a soldier, a little farther on, with a gun. "Let's go and talk to him." But the soldier did not respond to their attempts to begin a conversation. He went on staring in front of him, as if he were a deaf mute.

"Idiot!" Jair grunted. "Everything is going wrong for me today!"

"Stuffed dummy!" Raffi jeered. "Come on, Jair, let's take no notice of him and just swim past the barbed wire. We can have a look in the army camp. Perhaps we'll find the car there."

"But what about the minefields?" warned Jair. "Why do you think they put up that notice?"

"What," said Raffi excitedly, "do you think they've been hiding dynamite in the water?"

"I don't know. But in any case I'm not going to get myself blown up!"

And so they trudged back again, through the sand, along the water's edge, and past the endless cliffs with the many rifts and valleys, which served as camping places for fishermen and tourists. Unfortunately, the two boys didn't meet a living soul, and the heat became more and more difficult to bear.

Raffi walked into the sea every now and again to freshen himself up. Jair felt so dispirited that he thought even this was too much effort. He just dragged himself on.

He listened dejectedly to Raffi's account of his encounter with Mr. Rimon. Raffi told him enthusiastically about the suggestion that the boys should sell shells at the side of the terrace. But in his present mood Jair wasn't very keen on it.

"Mr. Rimon only says that in order to get rid of Hassan," he reflected glumly. "He's tried it so often already, Shaoul says. I wouldn't want to be a rival to Hassan."

"Why not?" Raffi defended himself. "If he asks such high prices then . . . ouch!" he suddenly shouted. During the conversation Raffi had walked a few steps into the water and stepped right on a sea urchin. Now he was angry about the pain and Jair had to suffer for it.

"Why did you have to put that ring in the shell, you idiot? That's why we're being boiled alive now!" he yelled at Jair.

"If you hadn't been even crazier and hadn't sold *my* shell to some tourists, then you needn't have trodden on that sea urchin now!" Jair put Raffi in his place, not without amusement. For a moment they stared furiously at each other. Then Raffi gave a short dry laugh and he pulled Jair over to the edge of the water and pushed him down on the sand, none too gently.

With a shout of joy, he picked up a five-pointed starfish which came drifting ashore just in front of his feet. "If that isn't a good omen for my new profession as a shell merchant!" he rejoiced. "You'll come with me, Jair, won't you?"

"I don't like the idea," said Jair. "After all, Shaoul is a

friend of ours. What is he going to say about it? And I can already hear Hassan raising hell because you're taking away his livelihood. The whole street will be against you, and so will your father," Jair added.

"I don't care," Raffi protested stubbornly, although, earlier, he himself had had objections too. "In any case, I want to teach Hassan a lesson – that swindler!"

"And if he gets hold of you?" asked Jair. "All that wailing of his is nothing but play acting, you know that as well as I do. He can hit like a madman. You ask Shaoul. Hassan is as strong as a bear. Did you know that he once unbuckled his leg to go after a chap who had pinched something from his stall?"

"Of course I know," said Raffi indignantly. "But he can't scare me, and he certainly won't frighten me away with a cudgel."

Jair was silent and stared glumly in front of him. Raffi couldn't make him out at all. So he went on about Hassan, and selling shells, but Jair remained silent.

For Jair had other worries. When he had rushed to the beach with Raffi, to follow the car with the Italians, he had been sure that he would be able to put the ring back in Mazal's hand that same evening. Now it was slowly beginning to get dark, and there wasn't a trace of the Italians.

"Do you think they're going to camp out tonight?" he asked at last.

"Who?" asked Raffi surprised. "Oh – sure they are. Mr. Rimon told me so himself. They had real camping kits with them."

"When do you think they'll come back?"

"I don't know everything! There's a hotel secret, just like a doctor's secret." Raffi didn't say that Mr. Rimon

had told him to come and ask from time to time, but he continued importantly, "I can find out. Because Michel wanted to come with me when I go diving for shells. Do you know what? Tomorrow I'll go to the terrace to sell shells. Then I'll ask Mr. Rimon. But you'll have to come with me." Jair hesitated. He wanted to raise objections. But Raffi didn't give him a chance.

"Only once, you scared old duffer," he urged. "Only to teach Hassan a lesson. You'll see he'll come down a peg or two. And we'll also get him to pay Shaoul for his finds, you'll see. Don't be a nuisance, Jair. I came with you today."

That was a good argument. Jair had to give in to that. Actually, to be quite honest, he rather liked the idea of being Shaoul's champion against his father. But the main thing was that he would then have a valid reason to be near the hotel. And that was most important, because then he could grab that boy Michel as soon as he showed his face.

Dead tired and with black shadows under their eyes, the boys arrived at Harar Beach. (Raffi had given it that name because he thought "the beach of the black rock" was too long.) In spite of the dusk, the preparations for the building of the bungalow were still in full swing. A truck had just arrived, loaded with planks and iron bars and bags of cement for the foundations.

When Mr. Harar saw the boys, he beckoned to them, and asked them to help with the unloading. Fortunately the job was soon finished. And after that Raffi and Jair climbed on the back of the truck which drove them home like lords.

14 ❧ *An Unsuccessful Morning*

When Jair woke up the next morning and looked out of the window, he saw at once that the sky had an ominous appearance and that the sun was invisible. And yet already it was almost as hot as it had been yesterday on the beach.

With effort Jair heaved his sleep-heavy legs out of bed. He stretched himself elaborately and told himself to hurry up. The wind had turned, he had noticed. The much feared south wind was blowing now, with its terribly damp, tough heat, which was dreaded by everybody. Jair was sure that Michel and his father would not stay out camping any longer.

Raffi didn't worry about the weather either, although it was only obstinacy that made him want to go to the hotel. And so the two boys walked into Mr. Rimón's office, very businesslike, as shell vendors. Mr. Rimón was busily engaged in conversation with the postman and the waiter. "Yes, okay," he nodded his head indifferently, when Raffi showed him, somewhat timidly, his basket of shells. "But on the terrace," he added sternly. "At the side. Only on the terrace. Is that clear?"

Jair prodded Raffi in the side to remind him, and Raffi asked, "Has Michel come back yet, sir?"

It was an innocent question, and was worded exactly as they had agreed. But what happened? Mr. Rimón went red, and his face puffed up, so that his head looked like a red balloon, and he shouted, "What business is that of yours, you cheeky devil! When they come, they come. *I'm* waiting for them, not you!"

Raffi and Jair left the office as fast as possible and chased out on to the terrace before Mr. Rimón would have time to change his mind.

Once they had posted themselves on the terrace, the boys realized that they could not have chosen a worse day. There were only a few people sitting at the tables under the gay parasols. They looked dejectedly at the sky or hid themselves behind newspapers.

No one so much as looked at the baskets full of shells, with which Jair and Raffi paraded among the tables. Listless voices told them that they had enough shells, and the two friends soon saw that it was no use staying here. They suddenly found their own collections insignificant and childish. It wasn't at all surprising really, that the hotel guests, who came past Hassan's fascinating table every day, had no eyes for their humble little baskets.

Jair sat down on the low balustrade of the terrace and began to sort his shells with slow fingers. All the time his thoughts were with that boy Michel and he forgot to watch whether anyone was beckoning him to come near with his shells.

He very much wanted to know what kind of a boy Michel was. In any case he envied him for his father, who was able to go fishing with him for a few days. Jair couldn't understand how a father could have time for things like that.

Raffi, too, was busy with his own thoughts. Of course he would never admit it to anybody, but if anyone was sorry about this plan of competing with Hassan, it was Raffi. None of those slick, lazy guests so much as looked at his basket.

The most insufferable thing was that Hassan pretended not to see anything. Raffi could not refrain from walking to the edge of the terrace to see whether Hassan was watching them. But he sat bent over his table and paid no attention to them.

"Wonderful, Jair!" shouted Raffi all of a sudden. He felt he simply must make that motionless figure down there jump up in the air somehow. "You made a fine profit there. Someone ought to make a note of that, someone we know!" However, Hassan did not show any sign whether he had understood or even heard his words. But Joseef – the waiter – popped his head out between the curtains and called angrily, "Hey, you there, what's all this noise about? Are you crazy! Once more, and I'll kick you out like a dog."

"I've got permission from Mr. Rimón," answered Raffi indignantly.

"Oh have you! I don't know what's come over him

then," grumbled Joseef. "Are we a respectable hotel or aren't we!" And the head disappeared.

Raffi bent far down over the balustrade of the terrace, to see whether anyone was approaching Hassan's stall. Good, Hassan didn't have any buyers today either. Raffi had at least that satisfaction.

It seemed as if Hassan could read their thoughts, for he rose slowly and picked up a large megaphone from under the table. He put it to his mouth and began to blare out loudly in the direction of the hotel. In a hoarse voice he sang:

*"In the streets of Constantinople
In the streeeeeets, in the stre-bee-hee-beets . . ."*

He did not go any further than that, but bowed in all directions, as if a large crowd were listening to him.

As Raffi watched, an old gentleman, with a beard down to his stomach, got up, and strolled over to Hassan's stall. A man who was drinking tea from a glass, suddenly lifted his eyes from his book, which was leaning against a vase of yellow artificial roses, and began to talk cheerfully to his wife. She had been staring at the sea without a break, all the time that Raffi and Jair had been on the terrace. But now the two of them stood up and walked, hand in hand, busily talking, towards Hassan's table.

"Well I never!" muttered Raffi. "You'd think he was the Pied Piper of . . . etc . . ." and he turned to Jair, "what was that chap with the flute called again?"

"Hammer or something like that," answered Jair, who came walking towards Raffi. "I say, Raff, you can't compete with Hassan. He's a terrific chap! I thought he would at least have come after us with his stick, shouting and cursing. But he's too clever to do that."

"You call that terrific, do you! Right from the start you didn't really want to come," said Raffi grumpily, as if that was the cause of this annoying and unsuccessful morning. "You . . . *you* are only here for that ring of your Mazal."

"And what if I am? In any case she's not my Mazal!"

"Oh yes she is," Raffi ran on. "Ever since you talked to her on the beach you've been going on like a knight from the Middle Ages. I would have left her to stew in her own juice long ago. What business did she have to give you that ring to look after?"

Jair did not reply to this, but said, "If you like, I'll go right now. Mr. Rimon only wanted to spite Hassan. Any idiot can see that you can't sell anything here."

Raffi paced up and down. To slink off like that, in front of Hassan's eyes, he thought was too humiliating. But to keep on walking about on the almost deserted terrace with their full baskets, was just as silly.

Suddenly he stood still in front of Jair. "I say, we're daft. We're standing here on the terrace as if we're the slaves of Mr. Rimon. Come on, let's try the other side of the street, a bit beyond the bus-stop. I am an idiot, why didn't I think of that before!" suggested Raffi.

"It's almost eleven o'clock now and we haven't sold anything yet," Jair answered. "Don't be a fool, I'm not staying here any longer."

"You're scared of Hassan," said Raffi.

"Just as scared as you are! Come on, and shut up, Raffi. We're only getting bored here. Come on!"

"No," said Raffi, but it sounded less convincing. "I'm just going to stand there for a little while. I'll come soon."

"Okay, see you later then," said Jair, "I'll look out for the green car. Perhaps I'll see it in a minute." And he ran away with his basket under his arm.

Yet where should he go now? Not to Harar beach. Father had told the children that they had no business there today, while the south wind was blowing. One might as well go and sit in a smoking oven.

Jair had to find a place where he could sit and be sheltered and yet keep an eye on the road to the hotel. He was now standing in the open square. This was where the wooden huts used to be. They had lived here when they had first come to Tamaría. And very soon it would become a beautiful park.

Where could all those huts have been put, which had been here until recently, Jair wondered – all those huts, with the exception of the one Father had bought. No doubt they were stacked somewhere, waiting to be sold to the north. Anything that was superfluous in Tamaría went to the north, and anyone who felt superfluous in the north came to Tamaría.

Jair looked at the town as it lay before him like a cardboard toy city. The concrete houses – blue, green and yellow – seemed faded in the dull light and really did look as if they were made of cardboard. Two toy soldiers sat in front of the tiny police station. They must be Joske and Micha, or the card-player, thought Jair. Toy sports cars and buses drove to and fro and the people who stood waiting and watching looked like little dolls.

Everything in the direction of the sea was shrouded in a dull mist. Only the big beach on the north side was still visible. When you looked carefully you could see that there were only a few people sitting under the long awnings in front of the eating places.

Jair didn't want to go to the large beach at all. From there, he would not be able to keep an eye on the road which the two anglers would take on their way back from

the Egyptian border. One part of that road he could see clearly from here, also a piece of the first section of the beach, on the way to Harar beach. And in front of that, Jair distinguished a round object the size of a nutshell – Uuno’s tent, made of mats. He peered hard, to see whether Uuno’s boat was near there. Unfortunately, he could not make out the tiny stretch of beach in front of the tent. From there I would be able to see the Italians’ car coming, he reflected. Let’s have a look to see if Uuno is there, he decided, and then at the same time I can have a good look at Uuno’s hut. I’ve never been there before.

"Oohoo! Oohoo!" Jair shouted, even before he had reached Uuno's little beach. At the same time he saw that the boat was not there.

He looked around with curiosity. When he and his friends went to look for sea horns and sea roses, they often came past this place. But he had never been so close to the hut before. Right in front of it a small pier had been built of old wood; a few half-decayed planks on rusty, sagging pillars, which were slippery and green with sea mosses.

Jair sat down on the pier and let his legs dangle in the water. Under water the pillars looked like branches in blossom. A dark red, lace-like weed had settled on them. Here and there small crabs came crawling out of the crevices between the planks. At his feet, half on the dry

land, half in the water, lay a bunch of sea urchins that had drifted ashore.

With a piece of wood Jair pushed the sea urchins on to the sand. Some of them still moved their spines feebly, but most of them were motionless. Only apparently dead, Jair knew. For if you put them in a tin of water, the spines usually began to move again.

Jair stood up and looked about him. The beach was like a scrap heap. Everywhere there were tarred pieces of wood, frayed pieces of rope, jute and broken glass. But amongst all this rubbish there was absolutely nothing that could serve as a temporary aquarium for the sea urchins. If only Uuno would come, thought Jair. Then he could give him an old coffee-tin. Maybe he could find something in Uuno's hut.

I wonder what it is like inside, Jair said to himself. But now that he came to think of it, he had never heard of anybody who had visited Uuno in his home. There was something mysterious about the hut. What was the reason for this?

Jair hesitantly touched the door which swung open. The sea urchins on the beach were forgotten; forgotten, too, was the small section of the road on which he had all the time been keeping a watchful eye. For the first thing he saw in the hut was a large, illuminated aquarium with the strangest fish in it. And that made him forget everything. An aquarium in a hut, Jair had never heard of that before. And what an aquarium!

Blue, purple and silver-striped fishes, and others with spots like panthers, flitted peacefully through the water in the three compartments. There was even a radiant red and yellow sunfish amongst them, with poisonous spines. Shoals of tiny, almost transparent fishes chased through

the water between the seaweeds and the sea anemones. These grew here exactly as they did in the world of corals, which Jair knew so well.

"It looks just like a museum," said Jair aloud. Why did Uuno, who could watch this spectacle every day through the glass sheet in his boat in the big sea, keep an aquarium in his hut, out here on the beach!

Who looked after it? Who gave the fish food? Or did the big fish eat the little ones? And where did the light come from? Jair became more and more amazed. Probably the light came from the pier. But what was the purpose of all this?

Not until then did he start to look about him. It was fairly cool in the hut, he noticed. How different it looked inside from what one would have expected! There stood a bed, covered with an army blanket, a stool and a straw broom. The floor was of grey concrete, and was swept scrupulously clean.

A small part of the hut was screened off by a second army blanket. There stood a home-made table of unplanned wood, laden with bottles and jars of all sizes, and a pile of plastic bags. Suddenly it became clear to Jair what the aquarium in Uuno's tent was used for. It was a kind of storehouse for fishes for the museum. He had seen exactly the same kind of assortment of bottles and bags in the museum when at one time he had, by accident, walked into a storage room. Of course, this was the reason why Uuno never invited anyone into his hut. Goodness, what a story to tell Raffi!

Jair went outside, where the heat hit him in the face like a ball of flame. And while he was looking about him, suddenly he heard the chugging of an engine. That must be Uuno coming home. It wasn't long before the boat

came in sight. Incredibly fast it neared the beach. Uuno steered straight towards his home and, without showing any surprise that Jair was there to welcome him, he threw a rope to him and shouted, "Pull to the left, then it is easier!" Jair pulled at the rope, but he did not find it hard to pull. Then he saw that Uuno was pushing from the stern. Rubbing his hands, the fisherman arrived on the beach.

"Boy, boy!" he laughed, without greeting Jair. "Have we got him?" and he looked at the boy with a broad grin. "We have got him!" Uuno did not explain what he meant by "we" and "him".

What would Uuno say, about someone breaking into his hut? Hesitantly, Jair followed him inside.

If Uuno found it strange that the door was open, he didn't show it. He walked straight to the aquarium, not, however, to occupy himself with the fishes. He bent down and took up a jug from under the aquarium.

"Water, cold," he said. "Nothing better than that." He raised the pitcher high and let the water squirt in a long curve into his mouth.

"In a minute I shall get him from the boat," he said. "Then you can see him."

"See whom?" asked Jair, turning his head towards Uuno.

"Sea devil of course. Or did you think we had not caught sea devil? Boy, what a job! Me . . . fall . . . stand up. Is sea devil in net or not? I go down. I look. I choke. Does not work, my oxygen tank. I go up. Cannot get spare tank open. Sea devil will not wait, who knows? And then . . . they come with boat in between."

"Who are they?" asked Jair impatiently. "Other fishermen? Did they try to take away your sea devil?"



Jair found a conversation with Uuno rather trying. He always took it for granted that one knew exactly what he was talking about.

"What, other fishermen!" said Uuno indignantly. "Do they come so far? Have Ze'ev, or Jam, or Arje enough guts?"

"Well, who came near there then?" Jair asked again.

"Those tourists of course!" answered Uuno, surprised that the boy hadn't understood him yet. "They just sail in between. I notice Italians. I say; help a moment, boy! And they, born fishermen! He steers his boat good, exactly to the right spot. And the little one holds up key of car to me and says: try! Yes, he said that. And boy, it worked!"

"Uuno!" shouted Jair. "Are you talking about Michel and his father? Yes? Where are they?"

"Is little one called Michel?" asked Uuno calmly. "Yes. How do you know? Boy, what a fellow. And the father! Almost I was corporal for him. He is now colonel, in Italian army. But I came here."

"Uuno, tell me quick, where are they now? I must know!"

"Must know, must know . . ." repeated Uuno. "In hotel I think. Folded their boat up, like this! And drove away, like that! Too much south wind for Italians. Tonight they come here. Fry fish, they caught it. Are here in my boat."

With one leap Jair picked up his basket and his sandals and was on his way. He had not time now to listen to Uuno's chatting, and he forgot all about the aquarium.

"I must go to the hotel," he called. "I must talk to them. Good-bye, Uuno!" And with that he scampered away.



Jair ran all the way back to the town, much to the surprise of the few people whom he met. His hair stuck to his forehead and the perspiration dripped into his eyes, but he hardly noticed it. Only when he had passed the first few houses, did he slow down. Why should he rush so, anyway, what was the hurry? Jair asked himself. The Italians must have been back in the hotel for quite a while now. Maybe they had taken a shower and had gone to sleep, or perhaps they were eating. In that case Mr. Rimón would certainly not let him in. Oh well, what did it matter. In an hour's time he would have the ring in his pocket, hurrah!

I've got plenty of time to go in a roundabout way, Jair decided, then I won't have to go past the Police Station

either. He didn't want to meet Joske just now, who was sure to start making jokes about the ring and the shell.

In the street behind the Police Station, not far from Pioneers' Street, Jair saw a small crowd. What was going on there? An accident? Children came running along from all directions. When Jair came nearer he saw a tall man leaning against the wall.

"Just now he was balancing potatoes on the tips of his fingers," said a boy next to Jair. "Just like puppets. Ask him to do it again."

Jair was about to open his mouth when he suddenly recognized tall Chaim, whom he had seen absorbed in his card play with Joske yesterday.

The conjurer looked with his opaque eyes over the heads of the children thronging around him.

"Please mister conjurer, would you show us another trick now?" Jair heard a familiar voice ask very politely.

Jair quickly hid behind the boy who had just been talking. It was Shaoul who had asked the question. He had to go on to the hotel in a minute, and he didn't want his friends to notice him. There were too many familiar faces here. There was Miriam too, with Jona and little Micha. And goodness me, who was that! Jair couldn't believe his eyes . . . Mazal! Mazal was there too, next to Shaoul, a little bit to the side, but quite near the front. Really, Mazal of all people. But she must not on any account see him. What was she doing here? Jair wondered.

First it looked as if the conjurer hadn't heard Shaoul. But then slowly he turned towards him and pulled – even more slowly – a piece of string from his trousers pocket.

"I suppose you want to find out how it's done, do you, hey boy?" said Chaim in an unexpectedly cheerful voice to Shaoul. "Well, then, you'd better have a good look."



"Who's got a knife?" he asked, stretching the string between his hands.

"I have," Jair blurted out, so loudly that the conjurer noticed him at once.

"Aha, an old friend," said Chaim pleased, and at once everyone's eyes were fixed on Jair.

"Stupid ass," Jair cursed himself. But it was too late now. The conjurer beckoned him to come nearer. Now there was nothing for it but to come forward from the back ranks.

While the conjurer tested Jair's knife carefully with his fingers, Jair threw a stealthy glance at Mazal. She kept her eyes fixed on the conjurer. Hasn't she seen me? Jair wondered. With Shaoul beside her, he could hardly tell her that she need not worry about the ring any longer. One more hour and she would have it back. As soon as this trick with the knife is finished, I'll go straight to the hotel, Jair decided.

"Can you cut that string?" Chaim asked Jair, pushing the knife into his hand. "Cut it firmly, boy. Don't be afraid. Hack it!"

Jair cut the string vigorously.

"Thank you," said the conjurer, and turned to the children. "Now I've got two pieces of string. Can you see? Have a good look at them. Two short pieces of string." And he held them up in front of him.

"What use are they to me?" he went on. "What can I do with two short pieces of string? Not even enough to tie up a man who wants to run away. Would you like to see how I make them into one long string again?"

"Yessss!" roared the children.

"Okay then, here we go. Watch it! You," he said to Jair, "You tie the pieces into a tight knot."

Jair did what was asked of him.

"No, tighter, boy. Haven't you got any strength in your hands?"

Jair didn't want to have that said of him and he pulled with all his strength at the two ends of the knot he had made.

The conjurer watched him. Then he took the string out of Jair's hand and shook his head sadly as the two halves slipped loose as if of their own accord.

"No use. I'll have to try it myself."

With an almost imperceptible turn of his hands he joined the two pieces of string together again. Then he passed his hands solemnly over the new knot . . . and suddenly threw a long and perfectly smooth piece of string up into the air.

"Is it real?" shouted the children.

"You bet it's real," replied Chaim. "You try and pull at it."

Shaoul was jumping up and down with delight. Jair gave him a friendly prod in the side, and again he glanced stealthily at Mažal. But she had eyes for no one but the conjurer.

"Again!" shouted the children in chorus. "Once more!"

"No, something else now," suggested the conjurer, who seemed to begin to enjoy his audience, which was growing larger all the time. He put the string away and carefully took a pack of cards out of his pocket.

Jair craned his neck. Was this the famous pack with which the conjurer fooled the fishermen? Then he must hang on for a bit longer and watch.

"Here you see four thieves," began the conjurer and raised four pictures of finely dressed gentlemen. "I have a weakness for thieves. They hate being caught. Are they

right or aren't they?" He waited a moment and then went on, "So one stands on guard. That's the first one. The other three discuss how they can best do a job. There, the plans are made, the coast is clear. The first thief goes out to steal."

The first gentleman with the beautiful clothes went right to the bottom of the pack of cards.

"Everything all right," he calls up from below. Whoops, there goes the second one. Can everybody see?" And the second card went down as well. "Come on, you go too," said the conjurer to the third thief, and he too was put at the bottom.

"Just what I thought," the conjurer went on. "There's a policeman coming. I don't have to show him to you, because we don't care for policemen, do we? Here he comes . . . but the first thief is on the alert. He whistles . . . pffff, and quickly they all come running up . . . rrrrtsssh . . . do you see?"

The conjurer held the cards high for the children to see and took the top cards one by one in his hand. And really, there they were . . . four smiling thieves.

The children shouted with delight. Jair stood dead still. "I must try that at home," he said to Shaoul. "I wish he would do it again, perhaps I can see the trick then."

"I bet he won't," answered Shaoul. "They never show their tricks twice. They don't want to give them away."

At the same time the conjurer, who had apparently heard what they said, asked Mazal, "Well, black-eyes, would you like to have a go now? Your friends want to see how it's done," and he held out the cards to Mazal. But Mazal stood there as still as a statue, with her hands down.

"Don't you want to?" he asked, looking at her frightened face. "All right, another trick then," and he put the pack of cards back into his trousers pocket.

"What did I tell you," whispered Shaoul to Jair, "You won't see that trick again."

"Come on," the conjurer continued to Mazal, while he pulled a ring from his finger. "Hold out your hand. Don't be afraid, it won't bite you. Be careful with it, because it's the most precious thing I've got."

There was laughter all around, but Mazal herself stood there rigidly, and she felt rather than saw that a ring had been put into her hand. Cold shivers ran down Jair's back. That man isn't a conjurer, he's a sorcerer, he thought. Or could it be just coincidence that had led Chaim, out of all the children who surrounded him, to choose Mazal to hold a ring in her hand?

Then Chaim the conjurer held up a large white handkerchief in front of the intently watching children. He waved it about and said, "Empty, you see? Quite smooth and . . . hmm . . . clean. Now, this girl here, what's your name again?" Mazal remained silent. "Oh," Chaim went on, "don't you want to tell me your name? All right then. Now this girl is going to put the ring in the handkerchief. A lovely ring, you see? It's my own wedding ring and I must be careful not to lose it, you understand," and he folded the handkerchief. Then he felt for the ring inside it and nodded his head reassuringly. Suddenly he pretended to be very nervous, he fumbled at the handkerchief again and then shook it, high above the children. He shook and shook and shook, but nothing fell down. He unfolded the handkerchief . . . it was empty!

Jair had to swallow, he thought it a weird coincidence. He glanced at Mazal. She looked very strange, with wide-

open eyes and completely white lips. She looked as if she might faint at any moment.

But no one was paying attention to Mazal except Jair. All eyes were fixed on the conjurer, who was searching everywhere, frantically turning out his pockets. He looked around desperately. Once more he shook the handkerchief out into his hand – it was no use of course. Then he hit himself hard on the right thigh and folded the handkerchief up again. And then he began, very anxiously and elaborately, to unfold it once again . . . he shook it . . . and yes, the ring fell into his open hand.

A deep sigh of relief escaped from the crowd of children. One moment there was complete silence. Then the noise burst forth. They shouted, clapped their hands, and stamped with their feet as if they had gone crazy.

“Hurrah! Hurrah for the conjurer! Again, again!”

The only one who did not join in the noise was Mazal. She looked from the conjurer’s hand, which was now wearing the ring again, to her own hand. Only a moment ago she had been holding the ring. To her, what had happened was a miracle. She had seen that empty handkerchief herself, and a minute later. . . . Mazal’s eyes sought Jair amongst the cheering children, who were crowding round the conjurer. But Jair wasn’t there any more. Had he not seen the miracle? thought Mazal. At the same moment she was startled by a husky voice.

“Why, Chaim, you’re having a nice time conjuring here, while your friends from Be’er Shewa are waiting for you. Come on man, and hurry up! You’ve made me look a fool. You’re a fine one, I must say. We’ve been looking for you everywhere,” said Joske the policeman, and he laid his heavy hand on Chaim’s shoulder.

But Chaim wriggled out of his grasp like an eel and

looked mockingly at Joske. "Don't get excited," he said calmly, "I shan't run away." And he turned to the children again, who had suddenly become as quiet as mice.

"Now here's that policeman I didn't show you before. Do you remember, the chap who was so keen on catching thieves? But this Joske of yours isn't so bad after all. Okay, boys, see you next year. I'll show you even better thieves then, just you wait and see!"

17 ❧ *The Ring in the Air*

Jair had indeed seen the miracle, but he had hidden when the noise had broken out and Joske had appeared on the scene. No one would see him going to the hotel now, he thought, and ask him nosy questions. But to his alarm he saw that the crowd had dispersed and Shaoul and Mazal were walking a bit farther ahead of him.

Shaoul behaved as if he had nothing to do with Mazal, Jair noticed. He whistled and looked up into the sky, being careful all the time to remain a few steps behind Mazal. Suddenly Shaoul looked around and Jair started. That had done it – Shaoul waited for him.

“You thought I hadn’t noticed you were following us, didn’t you?” grinned Shaoul. “I only wanted to make sure if you were spying or whether you really had to go this

way." He glanced at Mazal, who had walked on. "My mother saddled me with her. She always finds me jobs like that. But where are *you* going?" he asked.

"To the hotel," answered Jair. "Er . . . a message for my father. And you?"

"To the beach. To try to get hold of some fish from one of the fishermen. For Jichje's party," Shaoul explained.

"Okay, I'll be seeing you then," said Jair, who had suddenly become nervous at Shaoul's last words. He felt he must hurry up and get that ring back and take it to Mazal. She would probably think that he was Chaim the conjurer!

He ran down the street. One more corner and he was in the wide street leading to the hotel. From a distance he could see the green car standing in front of the door. Just as if it had never been away, thought Jair. A man stood bending over the engine. Would that be Michel's father? Now that Jair had come so near to his goal, he suddenly stopped dead. How would he ever make the Italians understand that he wanted that shell back? In Hebrew, of which they didn't understand a word? Would he manage that? Of course, once he had the shell in his hands it would be easy enough. Then he would break it open and they would understand why he had to have it back. As far as he was concerned the shell could break into a thousand pieces. It had given him enough trouble.

Hang it, if only he had Uuno here now, then he would have been able to interpret for him. Had he better go back and get Uuno? In this heat! No, Jair decided. In any case, Uuno wouldn't understand anything about this, and he would only add to the confusion with his odd gibberish. Jair would have to manage on his own. Did Mr. Rimon know Italian? Jair wondered. Oh my goodness, he would be so angry when he saw Jair walk into his office again!

"What are you doing here, Jair?" asked Gershon, surprised, wiping his black hands on his jacket which was stiff with grease and oil. "Nice car, isn't it?"

Jair laughed, shrugging his shoulders, and said nothing.

"Would you like a lift to Tel Aviv?" Gershon suggested. "You can come along if you want to. But I must go and change first." That was just like Gershon! He always made jokes like that. As if they would let him run around in that beautiful car. Jair had never seen Gershon driving anything better than an old, patched-up jeep.

But why was he dawdling about here? Was he afraid of Mr. Rimón perhaps? Don't be silly! And Jair resolutely climbed the broad steps to the hotel and went in through the revolving doors. In the cool, empty hall he hesitated a moment. Should he just walk upstairs, as Raffi had done, or should he wait until someone came? At that moment the hatch to the office was opened and Jair saw Mr. Rimón's broad face. Did that man *live* in his office?

"Well, you're back again," said Mr. Rimón affably. "Where is your friend?" Without waiting for Jair's answer, he went on, "You've come to sell shells again, I suppose. On the terrace, please. And what does our friend Hassan say about the competition, hey?"

"Where is . . ." began Jair, but Mr. Rimón interrupted him. "Kind regards to your friend," he said, "from that Italian boy who was staying here. He has just left."

Jair felt as though he had received a hard blow on the back of his head, which sent a sharp pain shooting down right through his body. There was a great silence around him; only in his temples was there the soft drumming of his blood.

"Have they taken the ring with them?" he heard himself ask. His voice seemed to come from very far away.

Mr. Rimon looked at him strangely. "What are you talking about, boy? I think you must be dreaming. Didn't your friend tell you about that Italian boy? Wanted to keep him all to himself, I suppose! A father and his son, they had gone out fishing, I think. They came back only a few hours ago."

Jair stood there looking blank, and let the flood of words pass over him. Mr. Rimon didn't even notice. Apparently, he found his own story terribly interesting. He seemed to be glad to have an audience, even if it were only a boy who looked as if he couldn't count up to ten.

"We waited for them all day yesterday, and then again today," Mr. Rimon rattled on. "They had only just left when several telegrams came for them. Not one, but three. From Rome. They had to go back at once. A mother was ill, or a sister . . . *Operatione*, it said. I even tried to get hold of them through the army commandant at the frontier. But they couldn't be found anywhere. Luckily they arrived back just in time to catch the last plane to Tel Aviv. I drove them to the airport myself."

"And the car?" Jair heard himself ask.

"Oh, so you do know something about it," Mr Rimon began again. "The car is still outside the door. Gershon will have to drive it back to Tel Aviv. It was hired. They wanted to go on travelling around the country in it. Yes, they know all the ins and outs, those tourists."

The voice droned on in Jair's ears. He felt as if Mr. Rimon would never stop. Jair couldn't stand it any longer in the dark vestibule. He had to get out, away! It was as if his legs took him outside of their own accord. Without a word he left the hotel, leaving Mr. Rimon standing open-mouthed.

18 ❧ *The Beginning of
the Party*

There was a great deal of activity going on around Jichje's house. On the veranda the table and the four benches stood drying in the sun. Mazal had done her very best and had scrubbed them beautifully white and bright. Together with Chasila, she had scrubbed the grey cement floors of the two rooms and then polished them with oil until they were as smooth as dance floors.

The mattresses were lying in the yard. Jichje was beating away at them with a stick. Clouds of dust enveloped him and he shouted to Chasila, "Moses only had to hit the rock twice and the water gushed out. I beat and beat and get nothing but dust."



Chasila came running out of the house and took the stick away from him. "Those mattresses aren't as strong as that rock of Moses'!" she scolded him. "They'll soon be in shreds! That's what happens when a man starts meddling in women's work!" She picked up a mattress as if it were as light as a feather and carried it inside.

Avram and Efraim trudged in and out. They were lugging chairs and stools which they had borrowed. They also carried baskets full of glasses and crockery. Last night their father had carefully cut their black, woolly hair, so that their shabby caps now hung down over their eyes.

Chasila, coming in with some silk blankets, looked the two boys up and down, then put a large washing tub to

fill up under the tap in the kitchen. As soon as the scalding hot water had cooled down a little, they would receive the same treatment as Grandmother Cheftziba's washing.

Jichje had gone to Chabib Mizrachi's. There he settled himself comfortably in front of the café, and invited everybody who passed by to come to his engagement party that evening.

"Then you can meet my future bride," he said proudly. "It won't be quite like we used to do things in the Yemen, but there will be something to drink for everyone," and he clacked his tongue significantly.

Jichje sent the children, who were playing in the street, to give the message to their parents. "You may come yourselves too," he said generously. Everybody in Pioneers' Street would have to join in the celebration, Jichje said to himself.

Then he let Chabib serve him a cup of coffee, and he had a hookah brought to him.

Completely at ease, he slowly inhaled the smoke, meanwhile keeping an eye on his house. There were more visitors than there had ever been before. The women from the street came along with cakes, tarts, sandwiches and bags of peanuts. Jichje chuckled to himself. What a fuss Chasila had made, when he told her that he wanted to invite the whole street to his party.

"A party in a house where there's no woman to see to the food and the drink, I've never heard of such a thing!" she had said.

"Food and drink come of their own accord in a house of joy," he had replied. "That is an old saying of our wise men."

"That's back home in the Yemen," Chasila had added mockingly. No one could stand up to Jichje's fine words.

But now Chasila could see that he had not relied solely on the saying of the wise men.

In the bride's house, too, all sorts of things were being prepared. Jichje would send his boys after a while to collect the refreshments, so it had been agreed.

The door of his house opened again. Who was that coming out? Jichje looked and looked . . . not two dirty little ragamuffins with sagging pants, but two unrecognizable, neat little boys, in white, freshly ironed shirts over high-buttoned trousers. Avram and Efraim! They were wearing their embroidered Saturday caps and their hair fell in beautiful smooth curls over their ears. Chasila might not be a Yemenite woman, but she knew what was correct, Jichje had to admit. His bride would be sure to welcome such sweet little boys with open arms, he thought, and he pulled contentedly at his goatee.

And then Mazal! What miracles had Chasila performed on her? He couldn't understand it at all. Although it was not the custom of Yemenite fathers to pay attention to their daughters' whims, Jichje was glad that the girl's mood had changed for the better.

When he had gone to Chasila's house to bring Mazal home, so that she could make the house ready for the party, he had found her on the veranda with Shaoul. Both had been holding tins in their hands on which they had drummed as hard as they could.

"Shaoul has been teaching me," Mazal had told him somewhat timidly. "Look, Father," and she had started to bang on the tin, at the same time snapping her fingers so that you could clearly hear the sound of a drum. Her stiff pigtailed had bobbed up and down in time to the rhythm. Was this his Mazal? Jichje had asked himself in surprise.

"Just like her mother," he muttered in his beard, at the memory of this scene. His first wife had been one of the best drummers in the Yemen. And she too had been so young! So life goes on, Jichje thought wistfully, watching Mazal working busily. He had only just realized how much she resembled her mother.

And how diligently and willingly she had set to work after that, Jichje went on musing. She had scrubbed and polished and swept and mopped. Her stepmother could be well satisfied. And in that case Grandma Cheftziba would be allowed to come back too. In any case, he had had to promise that to Chasila, before she had consented to work in his house. It was all right with him, as long as the three women could live in peace together.

"It's all turned out for the best, it's all turned out for the best," Jichje muttered to himself contentedly, sucking at his pipe and looking sleepily at the air bubbles dancing in the glass of the hookah.

It had all turned out for the best, Chasila thought too, as she put three gladioli in a vase. These were the only flowers that were sold in Tamaria. They stuck up into the air like sticks, the buds were still almost closed and nearly as pale as the leaves. But flowers were flowers, thought Chasila, and at a party you ought to have them.

Secretly she watched Mazal, who was putting the bottles of beer and lemonade, sent by Moshe, in rows in the other room. Her sallow cheeks were slightly pink, Chasila noticed with pleasure. Those few days in her home had been good for Mazal. And she looked more cheerful too. If you hadn't known better, you would have thought that the child was looking forward to the party that evening.

But what about the ring? Had Mazal forgotten about it, or did she blindly rely on Chasila's promise? Chasila was glad that there was a new ring in the cupboard now, for she had been sure all the time that Jair wouldn't bring the other one back. She had been on the look-out for him, but she hadn't seen him in the street for days. And now she had just heard from his mother that Jair was ill. He had a bad headache.

You could never tell what went on in Mazal's little head, thought Chasila, while they both arranged the refreshments on the plain white earthenware plates. It was a pity that Mazal said so little and seemed so timid.

Now she liked nothing better than to sit on her own in a corner, drumming. Shaoul had done very well to teach her that, Chasila thought proudly.

As far as the ring was concerned, her conscience was at peace. When Hassan came home last night, she had told him the story of the ring – a bit hesitantly at first. After all, she didn't know how he would take the news that they had lost possession of the lucky ring.

Fortunately, Hassan had thought it was a huge joke. He had had no objection to helping his friend Jichje and at the same time making a bit of a fool of him. "One ring is just like another, don't you worry, dear," he had said, bursting out laughing. Did that stupid Chasma really believe that her Natan was safer because she had got Chasila's lucky ring on her finger? Hee hee . . . that was a good joke. Such ideas belonged to the past, to other countries. Here they called it superstition.

"But don't talk about it, Chasila, old witch," he had warned her. "Don't make it known any more than is necessary. Not every one thinks like me. Natan might hear of it and then . . . hmm, it might turn out that the lucky

ring has lost its power. At least, that's what people used to say, in the old country."

Someone called from outside. Chasila hurried to the window. Goodness gracious, more gifts for the party . . . Efroni with a bundle of fresh *pitas* and Jona and Michal Tamir with a chocolate cake. Chasila received everything gratefully, and swiftly pressed one finger into the thick cream – just to see what it tasted like.

There were the two boys, whom Jichje had sent to the bride's house. They looked like pack mules. On their heads they carried round mats loaded with double layers of semolina cakes and cheese pastries. Under their arms they had bags of popcorn and roasted nuts. These were the real delicacies of a Yemenite feast.

"Come and look here, Mazal!" Chasila called back into the other room, meanwhile walking out to the door.

But Mazal didn't hear her. She stood in silence in front of the cupboard. Would she . . . or wouldn't she. . . . ?

Would the place under Mother's jewels still be empty?

Would she dare ask Chasila, or . . . ?

Mazal's frightened eyes darted right and left. Sorcery was a secret art. She had seen quite clearly that the conjurer in the street hadn't wanted to give anything of it away. If you wanted to know the secret of it, the magic was lost. Then it wouldn't work. And if Chasila could really work magic, as she had said. . . . Of course, Mazal wanted Chasila to succeed.

Then her eye fell on a little tin lying on the window-ledge. Impulsively, her fingers reached for it and began a wild drum beat. In the reflection of the window-pane she could see herself dancing with short, hopping jumps and behind her she saw the surprised faces of Avram and



Efraim. Chasila, too, came in to watch. She began to clapher hands and stamp her feet.

The drum beat grew wilder and wilder. The boys danced in a circle around Mazal, all the while uttering shrill, piercing shrieks. It had been a long, long time since there had been any dancing in Jichje's house. It was the beginning of the party.

*One Ring in the
Air and One in
the Hand*

Jair couldn't remember how he had arrived back at Pioneers' Street from the hotel. He could still feel the dull pain of the headache which had, as it were, shut him off from the rest of the world, locked him in a kind of vacuum, with only that continuous buzzing sound in his ears. And this reminded him all the time of the airplane in which Michel and his father were carrying the ring through the air.

Finally, Chaim Mizrachi's hoarse voice made him realize that he had arrived in his own street and that he would soon be home.

"Hey, boy," Chaim called to him, "what do I hear from your father? I wish I'd known about this sooner, then I would have put up one of those huts too."

"Yes, I'm sorry too," said one of the men who was for ever sitting by the tric-trac board. "I could have thought of it too. He's a smart chap, your father. How did he manage to do it all so quietly?"

"State secret," answered Jair curtly. For one moment he really didn't know what they were talking about. But in an instant it was as if the headache had disappeared and his head became clear. His father was definitely someone to be proud of. All of them would have liked to own a small guest house, but Father had actually thought of the plan and carried it out. He had been very wise to keep it a secret. Jair realized that now. The whole street would have run off to buy bungalows, it seemed . . . if someone had given them the idea.

At home Jair found the family at the back of the house, in the coolest spot they could find, but he didn't join them. He felt he wouldn't be able to answer the usual friendly and interested questions that Father and Mother would ask.

"I've got a headache," he called. "I'm going to lie down on my bed."

"That boy," he heard Mother say worriedly. "He runs about far too much. No wonder he's got a headache. Miriam, take Jair some lemonade, will you?" She took a glass and filled it.

"Don't worry, dear," answered Father lightheartedly. "It's the *chamsin*. It'll get better when the wind turns. Let him come with me tomorrow. I'll see to it that he takes it easy. And late in the afternoon when it's cooler, we'll go to our beach." He turned and called through the open

window into the house, "Are you coming out with me tomorrow, Jair? We'll start making the veranda. But you'll have to take things easy and just watch, your mother says."

"Okay, Father!" Jair called back. It made him feel better to hear his father talk as if there was nothing the matter.

His headache had come back. Jair shut his eyes and pretended to be asleep when Miriam came in. She brought him some lemonade and a large piece of cake, and of course a lot of news. She was bursting to tell Jair all sorts of things. Unfortunately, she didn't find her sleeping brother a very receptive audience.

Miriam was the very last person Jair wanted to talk to, even though he had made it up with his impetuous sister on the evening after his unsuccessful trip to the Egyptian border. To his surprise she seemed to think he had promised to give the shell to Mazal. "I suppose that's why you were so angry with me, wasn't it, Jair?" she had asked him confidentially. "And even this morning you didn't understand that I had sold the shell for you, and for such a lot of money too! Did you look for another shell with Raffi?"

Jair had thought it best not to put her wise, and nodded. He had promised her the first five-piastre find that would turn up, and with this, peace was sealed. As a reward, Miriam had then come out with her news. "Did you know that Mazal is going to have a stepmother?"

No, he didn't want Miriam and her bits of news at this moment. It was better to turn his face to the wall and to pretend to be fast asleep, Jair thought.

As it happened, he really did fall asleep, and slept on right through the night and even till late the next morning.

But his headache was still there. It was not very difficult

for Mother to persuade Jair to stay in bed for a few hours longer, to try to get rid of the headache.

Drowsily Jair listened to the voices of Miriam, Jona and Channa, who were talking in the kitchen. The two girls had come to ask Miriam to go swimming with them.

"Has Raffi not been here?" Jair heard Jona say. "He said about an hour ago he was coming to see Jair."

"Jair was still asleep," Miriam replied, and went on in an important voice: "Father has taken Raffi with him. He's going to run errands first and this afternoon he'll be allowed to help with our new hotel."

What a swankpot Miriam is, thought Jair and he called out from his room, "Father only calls it a guesthouse!"

"Eavesdropper!" shouted the three girls in chorus.

Jona got up and walked into Jair's room. "Shall I tell you something, Jair?" she asked, and, without waiting for a reply, she said, "tonight they are celebrating Jichje's engagement, at his house. Did you know?"

"The whole street has been invited," added Channa, who had come near the bed with Miriam. "You'd better see that your headache is better by tonight."

"Do you know why they are having the party in this street?" began Miriam, looking at the others. But all three of them were silent. "Because Jichje has so many friends and Channa Shimoni has been living here for such a short while. Her family knows hardly anybody," she told them in a triumphant tone. "But actually it ought to be at the home of the bride."

"Then you'd better do that when you're a bride," Jair suddenly burst out. These kids were just like a bunch of old women. He had no patience with such insufferable gossips.

"Why don't you go and help Mother with the shopping before you go swimming!" he said to Miriam. "Didn't

you see she went out with two bags? We promised Father to help her carry things.”

“Mind your own business,” Miriam retorted, and she quickly pulled her friends out of the room. In the kitchen they considered in a whisper what they were going to do. A little later the door shut with a bang.

The sound resounded in Jair’s head. With his eyes half open he saw that Miriam’s bathing-suit was still lying on the chair. She wouldn’t want to admit it, but she had, after all, gone out to do what he had told her, he thought grimly.

The bang still went thudding on in his head, together with Jona’s words too, for they had given him the bigger shock. “Tonight they are celebrating Jichje’s engagement at his house,” he repeated aloud. “Tonight!” How could they celebrate without the ring? Jair wondered. Had Jichje not yet noticed that it was missing? Apparently not. Otherwise he wouldn’t have invited the whole street, surely?

Well, Jair wasn’t going to the party. He wished he could hide himself somewhere so that he wouldn’t have to hear anything about it. But that wasn’t possible. So he stayed in bed, with the sheet pulled over his head, dozing and waking, and always with the thought of Mazal and the ring at the back of his mind.

So the day dragged on. Mother brought him some pills, but they didn’t seem to help much.

“What’s the matter with you?” asked Father when he came home from work, walking straight up to Jair’s bed. He looked searchingly at his son. Was this headache a real headache? It suddenly seemed unnatural to him that Jair was lying immobile in bed all the time. It was not at all like him.

"Has anything happened?" he asked. "Have you quarrelled with Raffi?"

"No, nothing, Father. Only a headache," answered Jair. Should he confess everything to Father, just like he used to do, now that nothing could be done about it anyway? But that would be ridiculous. No . . . they would hear about it soon enough – tonight, when Jichje would open the cupboard in front of everybody's eyes . . . and would not find the ring.

Father tried to cheer up his son. "Have you heard the latest news yet, son? Jichje wants to become our night-watchman. He says he can easily patrol the whole stretch between the Town Hall and our beach. So you see, Jair, he wants to remain my shadow."

"He was in such a good mood today," said Mother, who had joined them. "He came here himself to invite Father. Without Father there wouldn't be a party, he said. And he said that you ought to take a good dose of headache pills, then you would soon feel better. Then you would be able to go to the party."

Jichje was full of good advice, Jair thought. "Is Mazal also going around with invitations?" he asked.

"No, Mazal has been scrubbing and polishing all day," answered Mother. "I didn't know she could work so hard. She's such a tiny thing. She has got everything ready, together with Chasila." Jair took it all in silently. Was it possible that Mazal hadn't said anything about the ring? Was she going to wait until everything came out, or . . . did she still hope that Jair would bring the ring back at the last minute?

He didn't feel his headache any more. The rest and the pills had worked. But he didn't admit this to anyone. So convincingly did he now pretend to be ill, that Father and

Mother agreed that it was better for him to stay quietly at home. They were going to the party, because they had promised to go, and he wasn't really so ill that they had to stay at home. "If you feel better later on, you can come, even if it's only for an hour or so," Mother suggested.

All three of them came to say good-bye to Jair before they left. Miriam in her party dress, itching to be off, promised hastily to bring back all sorts of nice things from the party for him.

A little later Jair heard the gentle click of the front door being shut.

How still it was in the house, oppressively still. Outside there were voices. Of course, the whole street was on the way to Jichje's party.

Jair sat up. He couldn't bear it any longer in bed. He went to the dining-room and turned on the radio. His headache wasn't altogether a pretence, he noticed, not without satisfaction. Now that he stood on his legs, he clearly felt a twitch above his eyes.

A knock on the door sent him back to bed like a shot. He felt safer there. "Come in!" he called.

Thank goodness, it was Raffi – Raffi, who had not yet heard that the Italians had gone.

Raffi didn't notice at all that there was anything the matter – he was so full of the events at Harar beach. "I worked like a real man, Jair," he said proudly. "And your father promised that I can come and help the same as you when the guests come." He talked on and on, he was full of plans, and Jair listened patiently. "Perhaps we could make a kind of playground for the children," Raffi suggested eagerly. "Of course we'll put our shell collection on display there. We'll make a stall, just like Hassan. And what do you think of building a boat together? I've just

been looking for a model in some old magazines. That's why I'm a bit late," he said apologetically. "My whole family has gone to Jichje's party."

Only then did he notice Jair's night clothes and a broad grin appeared on his face. "You're shamming, aren't you? It's the easiest way out isn't it?" he laughed. "I knew that when your father said this morning that you had a bad headache. But why? Haven't you got the ring? Haven't they come back yet?"

It was a relief to Jair to tell Raffi the whole story, even though he knew that Raffi couldn't do anything to help. Jair described his conversation with Mr. Rimon in great detail. Raffi couldn't believe his ears.

"They'd gone? Really gone?" he asked. "Did you understand him correctly? On the plane to Tel Aviv, did you say? Oh well, but that first time he had said they would be coming back. Perhaps he was only being nasty because we kept asking him about the Italians all the time."

But Jair shook his head. "Oh no! Gershon had to take the car back to the garage in Tel Aviv," he said.

"All right then," said Raffi, who had been convinced. "That proves it. Nice of Michel that he sent his regards to me. I wouldn't have expected Mr. Rimon to give you the message. And what are you going to do now?"

"Nothing," answered Jair.

"Nothing? Yes, that I can see." Raffi looked searchingly at his friend. "You can't keep sitting here in bed. Come on, let's go to Jichje's. You just pretend you don't know anything about it. Mazal won't give you away. And if she does, I'll tell them that it wasn't your fault at all."

"No, I'm not going," said Jair stubbornly.

"Everybody is there," pleaded Raffi. "We've got to sing and dance, Jichje said. We can make as much noise

as we like. He wants it to be like a real Yemenite party, and there aren't enough Yemenites, he says."

"I don't feel like going to that party, I tell you."

"Huh, tell that to your grandmother," said Raffi incredulously. "You're scared of Jichje."

"I'm not," protested Jair. "How could anyone be scared of Jichje! But I'm not going."

Raffi was silent. Perhaps he understood what neither of them could put into words. That Jair, who had tried so hard to help Mazal and who had been the first of all the children to be nice to her, was ashamed. He was ashamed because it was due to him that everything would go wrong. Jichje would miss the ring. It would come out that Mazal had taken it away because she didn't want to have a stepmother instead of her old grandmother. So the new mother would begin to hate her and the party would come to a sad end. Of course, the stepmother would never believe that Mazal had intended to put the ring back later, but in the meantime had lost it.

Perhaps, also, they didn't put it into words because they hoped – against hope – that all would turn out well. Everyone had gone to the party so cheerfully and besides, one always believes that things will turn out for the best.

"That damn plane!" said Raffi slowly and emphatically, after they had been silent for some time. He had to put the blame on something! And if Jair wasn't going to the party, he didn't want to go either.

"What shall we do?" he asked, walking restlessly up and down. "Maybe we can find that model of the boat. I'm sure it was printed in the *Youth Journal* last year."

"I don't feel like looking through all those magazines now," answered Jair flatly.

Then he glanced at Raffi's white shirt. "Why don't you

go to Jichje's, since you're all ready to go? You honestly don't have to stay with me." He took a book from the bedside table and turned his back on Raffi.

"All right, if you really don't want to come . . . well, I'll be going then. I'll stuff my pockets with popcorn for you. There are big tins full of them, Jona said."

"Eat well," Jair said and went on looking in his book.

When Raffi had left, doubtfully, Jair got up. He walked to the window. Raffi was a white blur retreating into the darkness, but soon his silhouette showed up again against the bright window of Jichje's house. A babble of voices, singing, and a dull drumbeat penetrated to Jair. Who was beating the drum? Probably Shaoul, or else one of the Shimonis.

It seemed as if the words which he and Raffi hadn't dared to utter a moment ago, were still hovering in the room. Jair saw the sad eyes in Mazal's tight-lipped face, when she had said, "We shan't find it again." And suddenly it seemed to him the simplest thing in the world to go to Channa Shimoni and say, "I lost the ring, it wasn't Mazal. It's my fault that the ring is now flying somewhere between Israel and Rome. Mazal honestly wanted you to have it."

And acting immediately on this impulse, he had a quick cold shower and wetted his unruly hair in order to be able to comb it back properly. In the wardrobe a stiffly ironed white shirt and a pair of clean khaki shorts were ready. He looked at himself in the mirror. Was he ready to go to the party now? His hair was tidy, so were his shirt and shorts. Goodness, his sandals. He would have to polish them first. The leather was almost white, it was so dry.

Handling the brown shoe polish cautiously, so that he would not make himself dirty, he began to doubt his plan

again. He had not yet seen Channa Shimoni. If she looked rather like his mother or like Raffi's mother, then she would probably believe what he was going to say. But she was a Yemenite like Grandma Cheftziba and Mazal herself. One knew so little about them. They were like a closed book. Grandma Cheftziba was the only woman in their street with whom he had never exchanged a single word. And Mazal . . . he had been at school with her for years and he had only just got to know her. And not very well, either.

Don't be silly, he concluded his reflections, Mazal is really just an ordinary girl. And he polished his sandals so fiercely that they shone like mirrors. But she's as shy as a mouse. Then her stepmother will probably be quite an ordinary woman too. Most people are nice when you get to know them, anyway.

Quickly he buckled on his beautifully polished sandals and stood for a moment irresolutely in the middle of the room. Had he better not . . . shouldn't he rather. . . At that moment there was a rattle on the door.

"Open up, Jair. I've got my hands full!" someone called.

Raffi came almost rolling into the room, his pockets bulging with popcorn and peanuts. And in his hands he held three dripping honey cakes. "These are from Chasila," he said. "She came up to me specially to give them to me. She asked how your headache was." Headache indeed, thought Raffi, looking at Jair. He put the cakes on the table and licked his fingers. Then he grabbed Jair by the shoulders with his sticky hands and shook him gently.

"Either you're mad or I am. Or we're both mad. No, we're all three of us mad, because Mazal is as mad as a hatter. *There was a ring!*"

Jair looked at his friend in astonishment. "There was a ring, did you say? Where was there a ring? Do you mean Jichje had a ring?"

"Third time lucky. Did it get through your skull at last?" Raffi sighed, relieved. "Jichje has just given the ring to Channa Shimoni, while he was making a long speech in Aramaic, or Yemenite, or something. After that he took it back again. That's the custom, I believe. He's got to keep it until they get married. So you can have another go at pinching it," Raffi grinned. "But now you tell me how it was possible! Come on, tell me!"

"You tell me! I swear I know nothing about it. But what did Mazal do?" asked Jair, tensely.

"Mazal? I told you already she's as mad as a hatter. I looked at her on purpose when Jichje started his engagement ceremony. First there was some singing, that was done by Channa's mother and sister. A lot of very loud shrieking. Didn't you hear it?" he interrupted his own story. But he went on again, "Jichje said that Channa's friends really ought to have sung that song. But because things are done quite differently anyway in Israel from the way they are in the Yemen, it didn't matter. Actually, the men and the women shouldn't sit together either, he said."

"Tell me about the ring now," Jair urged him.

"That's just what I'm doing, man. Listen. Jichje very solemnly went to the cupboard in the little room. He could hardly make his way through all the people and he stumbled over the bottles. He searched and searched . . . man, it took such a long time. Everybody was dead quiet. You should have seen Mazal's eyes. Honestly, they almost popped out of her head. And she went as white as a sheet. But I don't think anyone noticed it. Or . . . yes, perhaps

Chasila did . . . for she suddenly went to sit next to her. But when Jichje went to Channa with the ring in his hand, then you should have seen Mazal. She laughed, she simply beamed. You would have thought she was really glad."

"Of course she was glad, silly!" And, relieved, Jair kicked Raffi's leg. "What kind of a ring was it?" he asked.

"I really couldn't see. In any case, I think it was in a piece of paper. Yes, it was wrapped in a piece of white paper, I believe. I was watching Mazal all the time. I had to tell you all about her, didn't I?" and Raffi prodded Jair good-naturedly in the side. Jair didn't take any notice of his teasing.

"I should like to know what she thought when she saw that ring," he said pensively.

"I know what she thought!" Raffi almost jumped into the air. "I'm telling you, she's raving mad! She thinks that the ring got into the cupboard by magic!"

"How do you know?"

"Because I asked her myself!" answered Raffi proudly. "So there! I saw that Shaoul and his mother were standing next to her. They said something and pushed a tin into her hands. Did you know she can beat the drum? It's fantastic! Of course, I just had to see that. I had to wriggle my way through, it was terribly crowded. But when I was near her I asked her direct. Very softly of course. I just asked her, Mazal, who put that ring back into the cupboard?"

Raffi was silent. He was very much impressed by his own courage. "Well, come on, what did she say?" Jair pressed him.

"She said . . . well, you know what that kid's like . . . she said, it got there by magic. Yes that's what she said,

just as I tell you now. And wait a moment, that isn't all yet," Raffi went on, not giving Jair a chance to say anything. "Then she got hold of her new mother with one hand and still held on to that tin with the other one. And together they danced round the table, though there was hardly any room. And Mazal beating the drum, and all those Yemenites clapping, exactly on the beat. Man, can they clap! And they only move one shoulder, up and down all the time. Those little boys too, you know! And Jichje kept calling out: 'My daughter, my daughter, a real Yemenite!' It looked as if he was prouder of her than of his bride."

Jair suddenly remembered Mazal's enraptured face when she was watching Chaim the conjurer shaking the ring from his handkerchief. So that's what she had been thinking – magic! And did she still believe in it? Jair asked himself. But who – but what?

"Why don't you come too and watch?" said Raffi suddenly, because he had only just noticed that Jair was wearing clean shirt and shorts and that his hair was so tidy. "You had already made up your mind to come, hadn't you, you look so smart. Tell me honestly?"

"Yes, more or less," laughed Jair. He wouldn't dream of telling Raffi what he had decided to do a moment ago, but fortunately need not now carry out. "I thought," he said, "when the party is over and then perhaps they'll all dance in the street . . ."

"Oh yes, I'm sure we're going to dance, what do you think!" Raffi's eyes began to shine with mockery. "You really ought to dance with Mazal now, I think." And he suddenly pulled Jair out of the room.

"Have you gone crazy? Let me go! Watch it, I'll give you a kick if you don't stop it, Raffi!" Jair escaped from

his pursuer. But then they both walked calmly out into the street together.

Opposite Jichje's house they stopped and looked in through the window.

"It's much quieter in there now," said Raffi. They were all talking or eating, and here and there little groups were singing softly. They could see Jichje walking from one group to another. He picked up some *pita*, took a bite from it, then gave the rest to Jair's father. Probably as a token of friendship, thought Jair.

Mazal sat between Chasila and an older girl, whom Jair had never seen before. She was tall and thin, had thick, black, frizzy hair, and wore glasses.

"Who is that girl next to Mazal?" whispered Jair to Raffi.

"That's her," Raffi grunted back. "That's the one all the fuss was about. That's the new mother."

"Golly, is that what she looks like?" said Jair in spite of himself. "Surely Mazal needn't have been so scared of her. She looks just like an older sister."

"Ah, friend," said Raffi, suddenly quite serious, "you don't really understand that sort of thing, you know."

Jair didn't pursue the matter. He looked at Mazal, who didn't look in the least scared and timid any more. She looked really gay. Jair had never seen her like that before. Oh yes, he had, only once though. That morning when she had walked into the sea for the first time.

"But who on earth put that ring in the cupboard," Raffi whispered beside him, and he added, "I say, Jair, maybe you've dreamed the whole thing and I've simply sold an empty shell to Michel."

But Jair shook his head firmly. "You heard yourself that Mazal thinks that the ring got into the cupboard by

magic," he said. "Or do you think that we've both been dreaming all along?"

"That is possible too," answered Raffi thoughtfully. "But if it really isn't that, I would love to see Michel's face when he finds the ring in the shell."

"He'll probably think it's a story from the Arabian Nights," assumed Jair. "Joske from the Police Station also thought it was something like that. But do you know, maybe that shell of mine won't open in a thousand years. I stuck it together very firmly with that white of egg."

"Then Michel's great-great-grandson will find the ring. Because that white of egg must get loose some day, I suppose," said Raffi. "Won't he be surprised then about that prehistoric ring-animal of gold. He'll write a book about it." He waited a while and then went on, "And yet I should like to know who that magician of Mazal's is. Don't you want to know?"

"Yes and no," said Jair, wisely. "I'm glad it all turned out well. That's the main thing. I don't care if I never find out who did it. Perhaps she did tell her father everything after all . . . or maybe Chasila conjured a ring into that cupboard. What does it matter, really. Don't you think so too?"

"You're right, really. What does it matter! I say, what are we going to do tomorrow?" asked Raffi.

"Help Father," answered Jair. "Putting up the veranda. You come with us."

"Terrific!" shouted Raffi, very loudly.

"Ssh, you idiot, they'll hear us," warned Jair, but it was too late. The door of the house across the street opened and Jichje appeared in the doorway.

"Who's that out there?" he called. "And not at my party? Is that you, Jair? Come in, come in!"